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SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

ST. FRANCIS AND THE BIRDS
(Giotto : Upper Church, Assisi)

SAINT FRANCIS *of* ASSISI

From the French of
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PART ONE

I

His Times and his Country

SAINT FRANCIS of Assisi was a spirit so free, a soul so detached from ordinary humanity, that there seems little need to speak of his times before speaking of him. He sprang from them, but was not of them. Yet since they suffered him we ought to know something of them, not only in the light of events recorded in their history, but in the familiar aspects of their daily life.

Those times showed none of the withdrawal from nature and the universe characteristic of our own age. Machinery had not yet separated man sharply from the beasts. The horse and the ox were still his comrades. Flocks of birds fluttered in skies he had not yet scaled. In winter, wolves prowled on the snow. To think of them was not pleasant for the belated traveller on the mountains. But once safely at home it added to his comfort to fancy that from afar they

envied him the warmth of his house. In those days there were many sentiments in the soul of a man that barely subsist now in that of a child. He had fears unknown to us, but with these was mingled the involuntary pleasure of feeling the thrill of life in everything, and when they died down in a sense of safety, they gave an added zest to this. The richness of the universe found a parallel in the importance of the dwelling. We may still find these mediæval houses in the country villages, just as Giotto painted them in his frescoes, small, succinct and sharp of contour, with the elegance due to a purity of design that makes them almost like shrines. They had the more of soul in that everything needful for the maintenance of life was carried on within them. Linen was woven, bread was baked. The evening fire on the hearth was precious as a treasure. The faggots laid ready for burning had still the scent of the forest. Every detail demanded love and diligence. Lamps had to be tended like flowers.

We are far indeed from such thoughts and habits. Our lives are certainly less laborious, but they have lost in sensation what they have gained in comfort. Industrial production has surrounded us with a crowd of neutral and indifferent objects, multiplied indefinitely, which do not really belong to us, or enrich our houses. In those days, on the other hand, the smallest object was the obscure beginning of a masterpiece; every utensil was unique, each humbly trying to be beautiful, and even such as fell short of this end were at least solid, loyal and friendly. The sophistication and pretence we see everywhere in the things that surround us were unknown. The cloak that wrapped a peasant, coarser certainly in texture than that of a knight, was no less firmly woven, and the colour with which it was dyed faded to magnificent tints under the action of rain and frost. Bread and wine had their authentic savour. Daily they renewed the vigour of man, and when they were invaded and inhabited by the divine essence, their native honesty,

their humble excellence, made them worthy of the miracle.

In this old world each man was himself by virtue of the manner in which he accepted his condition. Each had his costume, distinctive as plumage. The basis of everything, the domestic virtues, marked the women who thought not of themselves, mothers, wives, housekeepers, spinstresses. On these deeply laid foundations rose the professional virtues, those of peasant, artisan and merchant. But passions too were strong. Each of these Italian towns aspired to sovereignty, each from its eminence bade defiance to its rivals and dreamt of making them its subjects. Such pride found expression in towers, towers of the city walls, towers of the municipal palace, towers of the lordly dwelling, haughty symbols rising all over the landscape. Pope and Emperor fought for these rebel towns. The Emperor built a great citadel on his, to keep them in check. He had done so at Assisi, but in the absence of his representative,

Conrad of Suabia, who had gone to pay homage to Innocent III, the townsfolk raided the fortress and demolished it. Then the nobles of the city sought to dominate the people. Perugia supported them, hence the battle in which Assisi was defeated, and Francis was made prisoner. Love affairs were both delicate and violent. At the two extremities of Italy lay Provence and Sicily, the most courtly, the most refined, the most voluptuous countries in the world at that period, and from them rose a constant murmur of lutes and viols and song. No doubt there were periods of rude hardship, and when Francis was born, there had been five years of dearth; but there must have been considerable wealth nevertheless, for in that city of Assisi, where we now see only humble shops there was commerce as important as that of Francis' father, the cloth merchant, whose business journeys took him as far afield as France and Flanders. The man of those times had a surplus of energy which he expended in contest

or merry-making, and sometimes in the two on the same occasion. At Treviso, in 1213, a wooden castle had been set up, to be defended by two hundred ladies of the nobility against besiegers without any real weapons. But Paduans and Venetians who proposed to attack began to quarrel among themselves, nearly came to blows, and caused a feud between the two cities. At Perugia every Sunday in May there were jousts between the young men of the town, so strenuous that more than one of the combatants would be killed. Festivals had something of the character of battles, and battles of festivals. Each town had its war-chariot, a moving structure decked with oriflammes, which circled about the mêlée. It would have been a disgrace had it fallen into the hands of the enemy. Splendour was then a natural accessory of life, expressing its exuberance. The modern man has no concern with such ideas; he is even more eager for enjoyment, but he cares nothing for magnificence. The festivals still observed

among us are artificial ceremonies "signifying nothing."

Moreover, above all the struggles and discords of the times, great ideas still maintained their authority. Italy lamented at the periodic descent from the Alps of heavy German legions, like clouds charged with lightning. But these clouds enfolded a sun, that of imperial majesty. The coming of the armies was dreaded, but that of the Emperor was looked for hopefully. He was expected to exercise his power for the peace of mankind. This word Peace, which our contemporaries carry about among our distresses like an empty vase, was one which the Middle Ages had power to fill, thanks to their doctrines. Peace was then the crown of order, the state in which humanity, turning to God, might fulfil itself. And in men's minds the Papacy represented an idea even loftier than the Empire. True, in Rome a fierce and mutinous people sometimes defied the Pontiff and drove him out. Heresies were numerous, no less insinuating than

stubborn. But even this bore witness to the vigour of religious life. The spiritual powers would be wrong to think it a good sign when they are no longer attacked; they should not mistake indifference for respect. All Christendom then hung on the successor of the Apostles. We are amazed at the immensity of the task to which Innocent III proved himself equal. Not only did he labour to make an Emperor after his own heart, and then to unmake what he had made; not only did he battle or negotiate with the cities of Italy, intervene in the politics of all kingdoms, many of which were vassals of the Holy See. But, immersed in such a multiplicity of affairs, he never disappeared in them. He remained the judge and the doctor to whom all difficulties were submitted and to whom the soul of an individual was of no less moment than the fate of a kingdom. Thus, above the struggles in which they were engaged, tiara and crown preserved a splendid ideal. The prevalent idea of these supreme dignities penetrated those

invested with them, devouring their own littlenesses, and in solemn moments a Pope was the Pope, an Emperor the Emperor. Thus the leaders of men, though much more absolute than to-day, were in truth less free, in this sense: they were enmeshed in a system where the ideas to which they owed their glory held them in bond, obliging them to respond to the aspirations and exigences of the people. Our modern politicians who hold high office to-day are merely the winners in a game, the object of which is to get all they can; they are men who have succeeded. And the worst of it is not that they spend their time in ignoble intrigues, but that, living as they do, they must still undertake to offer to the people all the great words that glorify an ideal. Speaking thus without authority, they breed disgust of the things these words represent. In those days, on the contrary, the men who were raised above all others felt that they were great only by virtue of what was living within them. Enriched with all the insignia of material

power, they nevertheless believed in purer superiorities greater than their own, and sometimes they themselves exalted these. Two years after the death of Francis, Gregory IX canonised him. He had been forced to leave Rome by the Emperor Frederick, who was waging fierce war upon him. These changes did not prevent him from exercising his essential functions serenely. The ceremony took place at Assisi. The Pope was surrounded by Cardinals, Bishops, Abbots, clergy, monks and nuns, together with a lay multitude in which everyone bore the marks of his condition. The August sun blazed on crosses and pectorals, copes gleamed brilliant as snowdrifts. The Pontiff was eighty-six years old. He had been very handsome, as was still evident. As a Cardinal he had known Francis and had protected his Order. He himself pronounced the panegyric of the Saint, and began by comparing him to the Morning Star. But old men have fragile nerves. Gregory was moved and began to weep. Cardinals and Bishops imitated

him, and soon all the congregation was in tears. These were not the sentimental tears of the eighteenth century, but the deep and ingenuous homage of men to one who had satisfied their aspirations towards the sublime. Finally raising his arms to Heaven, the Pope, gleaming with jewels, proclaimed the saintship of the Patriarch of the Poor.

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A society which offers such spectacles has a nobility we should do well to recognise, distinguishing its essential characteristics. It may safely be asserted, of course, that man is always the same. This is one of those self-evident and unimportant affirmations we leave behind us as soon as we begin to think. At all periods man brings the same instincts to bear upon life. But it is of real interest to know what the men of each period have added to the common stock, if they have controlled and disciplined these instincts, or if they have been content to give them free play. Whatever may be thought of the society of the

Middle Ages, it cannot be denied that it was an aspiring structure. The very variety of the types which manifested themselves in it so vigorously must be reckoned in its favour. There are, in fact, secret links between all powerful ways of life. They invoke, challenge and invite mutually. Even when they seem most antagonistic, they react one upon the other. Francis always showed great indulgence to men whose characters were most sharply opposed to his own. His natural affability led him to behave thus, without any idea that if the warriors, the tyrants and the brigands of his age had not existed, he himself perhaps would not have existed either. It is not in effeminate periods that the purest types of gentleness manifest themselves. The modern world believes itself violent, but this is an idle boast; it is merely coarse. If violence proclaimed itself boldly, characters of an opposite type would no doubt arise to rebuke it. Once more we must note that present conditions are much less favourable than those of

the times of Saint Francis. We live in a purely material world, where the abuse of great words masks the lack of all doctrine; should violence really get the upper hand among us, it would have every chance of persisting for a long time unopposed, as the sole authentic force modern man is ready to recognise, whereas in the thirteenth century, enveloped and held in check on all sides by accepted ideas, it was reduced to taking its place in the sum of characteristics, where it is well that it should exist and manifest itself. The one thing that threatens the highest expression of human nature is a long habit of mediocrity. Mediocrity thinks it can permit everything, it even believes itself to be everything, seeing not that in its dreary atmosphere the nobler ways of life are languishing and dying. It is curious and almost laughable that in an age when there is so much talk of liberty, the individual is on the verge of losing its most precious gift, freedom not to live like others. It is evident that the

herd of to-day disapproves, and as far as possible seeks to prevent ways of life different from its own. The religious orders are barely tolerated, because the principles on which they are founded brave the tastes and preferences of the multitude. This supremacy of mediocrity goes much farther than is supposed. If an exceptional man emerges, the doctor and the alienist have an eye upon him forthwith, and are ready to impute to him those morbid tendencies from which only mediocrity can never suffer. Modern man has taken every precaution against the sublime. It was otherwise in the Middle Ages; men were then always expectant of the superman. This exposed them to many errors and many risks, but there were open doors then which now are closed.

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It is not enough to speak of the times of Saint Francis. We must also know something of his country. It is in such perfect accord with him that were we not weighing our words, the epithet by which

we should involuntarily define it would be "Franciscan." But we must pass through this word to get at the characteristics it suggests. What pictures of this country rise in my mind! Very often I arrived there from Florence, and the first indication I had of it was Lake Trasimenus, pale and almost volatile, a neutral tint in the landscape. I recall the vast valley and all the cities that dominate it on either side; ancient and warlike Perugia, safe now from all assaults save those of the winds; Gubbio, harsher than Perugia and still in part one with its mountain; Borgo San Sepolcro, with its leaning belfries and time-worn stones, standing against the sky like a tremulous drawing by the hand of an old painter; and on the other side Siena, solid and suave San Gimignano, like a quiver full of arrows with its walls and towers; Orvieto, enthroned like Perugia, and the ancient Etruscan cities on the heights, Cortona and Volterra, austere by day, and at night drunken with moonshine. I see myself again at Montepulciano on a

dark and boisterous November day ; in a square with a gaunt church at one end, like some huge out-house of God. The wind bored angrily into the narrow streets, and through one of them I saw in the distance a streak of Lake Trasimenus, grey as pewter. I remember my walks in the marvellous serenity of October among the villages and townlets between Siena and the valley. I would go into a church where a work of Vecchietta or Sassetta shone like a mystic jewel, and coming out after the delight it had given me I had no sense of a sudden descent in returning from art to nature. The whole landscape seemed set against a golden background, like the old painter's picture. There was the same order as in his work. An intelligent light seemed to be calling the souls of things to their surface. I would return as evening fell. My road passed through country seamed by narrow valleys. Though there was only a slight chill in the air, its perfect limpidity suggested cold and even frost. Light shadows drew a transparent veil over the

earth, while on the hill-top the crescent of pure gold seemed hardly more remote than a shepherd.

I remember the Sundays in those hill towns. They were not the lazy insipid Sundays of great cities, but grave and holy days of rest, the necessary pause between labours. Old women sat before their doors, waiting for Vespers: a lean cat rubbed itself against their black cloth slippers. Oxen, horses and mules were also at rest. Below, the dust whirled along the high road like one of the poor crazy women one sometimes meets in this country. Suddenly, the bells began to scatter their notes like sowers, and it seemed to me that on this day when the peasant drops no grain into the furrows, his soul in its turn receives the germs of a higher life.

I spent a summer in the mountains of the Casentino, not far from that Mount Alverna where Francis received the stigmata. The towns below lay baking in the sun, full of sloth and history. Bibbiena curved along the slope of its hill.

The Palazzo Comunale of Poppi, small and savage, bit at the azure above it with all its battlements, like a wolf. On the mountains there was light without the heat. A graceful forest, shot through with radiance, covered part of the slopes. When I made my way along the roads I passed houses in which poverty had its nobility; I looked into almost empty rooms where the presence of the necessary furniture seemed all the more instinct with sense and dignity. The table was the solid support of meals by which labour was rewarded. The bed made one think of birth and death and fruitful loves. A religious picture on the wall linked the simple life of the house to lofty hopes. The hard life of the women in this country gives them an austere beauty; their sunburnt cheeks, without a trace of fat, are as a desert region between eyes and mouth. Sometimes I would take another way, and walk alone upon plateaux where I could see nothing human and where my sole companions were the fresh winds of the mountains, running

beside me and telling me in somewhat breathless voices some tale of turtle-doves and swallows. Why was all this so sweet? Why do I remember so distinctly that autumn day when the soft clouds raced along the slopes, and I came suddenly upon some sheep grazing on a patch of tender grass studded with tufts of purple heather? Their shepherd watched them a little higher up, motionless as if petrified; great strips of mist of an exquisite grey enframed this picture, a picture with the isolation and perfection of images seen in dreams.

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And I see thee too, again, stony Assisi. I feel thy poignant charm so keenly that I hesitate to define it, lest I should fail to translate it rightly. The very word charm is not the right one, for it suggests something occult and secret, and is there anything hidden in thine honest soul? Yet transparent as it is, it is more difficult to express than that of any of thy sisters. I know very well what Perugia is: a throne of pride. Passing along its bastion

to the point where the soil ceases we hang over one of those vast expanses which excite the greed of conquerors. But after our eyes have wandered over the whole horizon we see thee at last, ripening gently at the foot of Mount Subiaso. And he who presses on to thee after leaving the rampart sees before him only a street rising between little yellowish grey houses. Thou hast no proud monuments; thy churches are sufficiently adorned with the rose-windows that blossom on the façades, and even the antique temple in the market place which makes a background for the sale of poultry and vegetables has that air of a majestic little dwelling which Giotto accentuated in the fresco where he painted it. Yet thou too hadst thy petulant masses and fierce nobles. But it would seem that of all thy sons, thou wouldst cherish the memory of one alone, he who purged thee of the passions of the rest. The one building the colossal dimensions of which might discount the general impression is in fact the monastery

dedicated to the Saint. But the spirit of Francis is still so vital that it has power to dissipate the great mass of buildings, galleries and buttresses; and as in a fairy-tale the murmured words of a charm cause a whole city to disappear, the pride of all these structures seems to vanish when in speaking of them we pronounce the name of the Disciple of Poverty. The views the wanderer has from the little squares of Assisi differ altogether from those he sees from Perugia. Here he no longer dominates the landscape, he associates himself with it, sees it entering into the heavens, laden with all the gifts of earth. It is there I would fain return in spirit, to recall the character of the ancient Umbrian country. It must be noted first of all that it has none of the insipidity sometimes ascribed to it under the guise of amenity. True, the autumn is suave there, when a soul seems to tremble at the edge of every line and one sees at the end of a rising road one of those trees that Perugino loved to paint, so slim and fine with its hair-like

traceries. But the summer is burning and the winter rude in this Umbria. The cold keeps garrison like a feudal baron upon the heights and rushes down upon the plain with all his rough veterans of north wind and frost. Yet these rigours are never inhuman. Umbria is a land without excess or confusion. Everything in it stands out clearly, as if illumined by its function. The little bridge bends its back to carry the road bravely. The inn keeps its promise of clear wine, the brother of light. The smallest house has its tutelary grace of shelter. Returning from a walk in this country, one seems to remember everything one has seen, the cross that stretches its arms at the boundary of two fields, the bird the wind cast for a moment on a stone or bush. This home of modesties is the home of innumerable presences. Life there begins with delights. I will not forget in the record of my pleasures there, the excellent meal I once had at the hotel at Foligno, and why should I scruple to speak of the good red wine I drank, a wine

indeed that calls for mention here, for it was called Drive-away-the-devils! But such enjoyments are frugal, and never absorb the guest, just as the abundance of fruit never becomes heavy, and the beauty of the crops does not prevent one from looking at the horizon. Among those fields where the peasants labour there is always here and there a chapel with the figure of a saint, a charming faded fresco, proclaiming the pre-eminence of the contemplative life above all toil. The soil is fertile, but at intervals there are tracts of volcanic mud, grey earth that produces nothing, so that among the cultivated hill-sides there is often one which seems to have taken monastic vows, and put on the coarse gown of the friar. The same idea is suggested by the variety of the trees. By the lakes and at the foot of the hills there are always olives, their delicate lustrous foliage reflecting the silvery radiance of the clouds. They never tire of bearing, and many whose hollow trunks are scarcely more than old planks

are the most heavily laden with fruit. Near them, the vine runs from elm to elm, offering its grapes with extended arms. Little oak-trees are grouped rather higher up; I hear their civic rustle as I pass, and remember that there is no small town of this country which did not deem itself another Rome as soon as it had the strength to raise a few towers. But above the oaks we see cypresses. They rise in procession along the roads, marking the way to lonely shrines. Even on stormy days when other trees seem about to be torn asunder and fight desperately with the winds for their foliage, they scarcely rock their impassible mass which murmurs a gentle complaint. Thus the whole country seems to be divided between the olive and the cypress, trees as it were, of Martha and of Mary. The olive works, the vine dances, the oak declaims, the pine sings, but the cypress prays: it is the monk of the landscape. The hierarchy of human activities follows the same order: they begin with the peasant bending over the earth, they end

with the priest pointing to heaven. There are shepherds above the labourers and hermits above the shepherds, but these different callings accept their places without misjudging one another. This land, where one passes insensibly from enjoyment to renunciation, from society to solitude, where there are no abrupt greatnesses, where the aspiring soul does not spurn what it leaves behind, where there is nobility in the lowly life, and gentleness in the higher, is the land of Saint Francis.

II

Youth and Conversion

I do not propose to enter into the details of the Saint's life, firstly, because this has been often done, and more than once very well, secondly, because the sequence of events is not definitely fixed, and lastly, because these events are not of the first importance. And indeed, though it be necessary to follow step by step the career of the ambitious man or of the politician, since it is in these that he reveals himself, there is no such necessity in the case of the higher souls of a purer order, artists for instance, and above all, Saints. Their lives are not in their biographies, they develop on a higher plane; the principal facts of their existence serve only to give them the starting points they need for their upward flight; they are as the piers sustaining the arches of a bridge that forgets them. In the life of Saint Francis the first, the least ample of these arches, the one still resting on the shore, was his

St. Francis honoured by the simpleton

childhood. He was born in 1181 or '82, probably in the latter year. His mother was of good family and may have been a Provençale by origin. His father, Bernardone, was a wholesale cloth merchant, and one of the principal citizens of the town. The merchants of those days had little in common with what the people of the shop have become. They were bold and sagacious men, who "lived dangerously" and were constantly on the road. Trade, which now tends more and more to cast off all the restraints of morality, was then strictly governed by this, as we may judge by Leo Battista Alberti's book of a century later, or what Saint Thomas Aquinas says in the *Summa*. Bernardone was not at Assisi when his son was born. The name Giovanni was given to the infant at first. It was his father, who, on his return, changed this name to Francesco, in memory of France which he had just quitted, so that the child, having borne and then discarded the name of the Precursor, seems as it were to have announced

himself. It is easy enough to picture him in his earliest years, for more than any other man he preserved throughout his life those qualities which irradiate childhood. He was, no doubt, all petulance, vivacity and charm. Indulgently brought up by his parents, he found himself naturally as a youth at the head of the wealthy young men whose exploits were the talk of Assisi. Up to the age of twenty-five, Francis led the most dissipated life. He was the king of a band he was always leading on to new follies. It is difficult to say how far these extravagances went. Some of his biographers have thought it well to draw a veil over them. Others, who speak of them with the conventional rhetoric of the ecclesiastical writer, tell us little more than the rest. The majestic lapse of centuries protects the life of Francis from the research of scandal-mongers, and we shall never know, thank God, the name of the little mortal to whom that heart which was to embrace the whole world was given for a moment. It is certain

at least that Francis brought into this life his poet's nature, in other words, that one drop of pleasure would have intoxicated him, whereas his companions would have needed a large glass, and perhaps there were not so many personal adventures in the round he led as one might be inclined to suppose. It is certain, however, that he was always very prone to carnal desires. It was to mortify these that he rolled among thorns and in snow. Once when the people were praising him as a saint he replied that he was not yet out of danger, since he was still of an age to have a wife and children. That he should have specified this among all the temptations that assailed him shows what he felt to be his weakness. It was the more seductive to him, no doubt, because of the tenderness that tempers voluptuous pleasure. Besides, in his profane youth, Francis was always singing, and of what do songs speak but of love? Yet even then his nature revealed qualities that were always to distinguish it; he treated his inferiors and the poor with an

exquisite courtesy. This son of a trader had such an air of refinement that when he was made prisoner by the Perugians they put him with the nobles, and as there was one among these from whom all the others held aloof, Francis approached him, won him by kindness, and brought him back to his comrades. He was lavish with money on all occasions, and this was well, for if prodigality does not necessarily imply real liberality, it may at least herald this, whereas we may be sure that nothing great will ever come from a miser. Another trait that shows the generosity of Francis was his taste for pleasure. Pleasure is the poetry of enjoyment. There can be neither ardour nor delicacy in him who has never loved the shifting splendour of a goblet, filled with transparent wine, the sweetness of a song that woos to love, or the beauty of a feminine look whose sudden promise changes one's fate. Even for saintship, experience in a man is as important as purity in a woman, and it is well both that Christ should have been the first love

of Saint Clare and not the first love of Saint Francis. However, the impulse that hurled Saint Francis into pleasure was too strong not to have carried him further. It is the way of youth to try to satisfy our natures before we have had time to know them. We may imagine the young man leaving some banquet among his laughing and singing companions, the torches tossing their yellow locks around them. Many a time the moon must have pierced through their glowing vapour to the very soul of Francis and when he halted in the open spaces about the city, and the great nocturnal silence triumphed at last over the shrill sounds of song, then, forgetful of his companions and of the life he had hitherto led, he must have yearned for some object that could satisfy him.

He fell ill. Illnesses break down the order of life, and this is why even when they are not dangerous, they cause such distress to many men who feel themselves falling into the void when their habits are disturbed. For this very reason,

they give those who have something in them back to themselves. On this occasion Francis must have become more conscious of his aspirations and uncertainties, but it was natural that when restored to health he should have found himself once more entangled in all those things from which he had to some extent freed himself. It seems, however, that he had so far progressed that he desired to pass from pleasure to action. A noble of Assisi was preparing to join Gauthier de Brienne, who was fighting in Apulia. Francis determined to go also. He armed and equipped himself. His childish imagination was fired. His dreams nourished his hopes and ambitions. He set out. Scarcely had he reached Spoleto when he was again attacked by illness. It was in this way that he was brought back to the truth. God revealed Himself to him as the Master he was to serve. Instead of going far afield in search of a new life, he returned to begin it less easily at Assisi.

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This rapid evolution need not surprise us, if we remember the times in which he lived. Religion was very near to men in those days, even to those who believed they thought little of it. As soon as they turned their backs upon their age to rise higher, they were already walking in its ways. We must further remember the vivacity of Francis. A slower spirit might have needed to go to Apulia and lead the life of a warrior, in order to turn from it in disgust later. Francis finished with this kind of life without having ever embarked upon it, and reached his true objective at once. It is here that his conversion begins. But to understand this drama aright we must first of all consider that a real conversion is not what it seems; outwardly, there is a man who renounces himself; inwardly, there is one who fulfils himself. Those which are mere reversals are of little importance, and often run the risk of a fresh accident subversive of the first. The true conversion is to become oneself again.

Hence, those to whom this experience has been given rejoice and are comforted unspeakably, for they have the happiness of finding not only God but themselves. Francis did not really change his ambition; he purified and concentrated it. More than ever he dreamt as he had always done, of being a great prince. But instead of becoming one in the domain of illusion and deception, he aspired to realise his dream in that of truth. He still desired to be the knight of a peerless lady; but she he was about to choose was far above all the beauties of Assisi. Such passages from false to true, however, are not accomplished without doubts and anguish. He who essays them has cast away what he no longer loves before he has grasped what he loves. The records we have of this moment in the Saint's life are as confused as it no doubt was in reality. Uneasy and listless, he left Assisi with a friend whose name we do not know and the pair made their way to the mountains, like treasure-seekers. This quest of hidden treasure long filled the

imagination of men, and there are certain places where it endures to this day. The peasants of the Roman Campagna still tell stories of treasure-trove, and in Musulman territory, at Fez, at Damascus, there are always men who go out of the town as if for a stroll, and who look behind to see that they are not followed, before making for the secret place where they believe riches have been buried. But Francis' search was of a different kind. He entered a cavern where he remained long in prayer, and came out, his face wet with tears. Yet lively as were the new emotions that possessed him, he could not be sure of their strength until he had found an opportunity to test them. He went to Rome, to the Church of S. Peter, and indignant at the scantiness of the alms he saw offered, he emptied his purse on the tomb of the Apostle; then borrowing the rags of a poor man, he placed himself among the crowd of beggars at the door and held out his hand for charity. But none of these acts cost him sufficient effort to

prove to him that he was really a new man. At last he found the trial he needed. In those days there were lepers everywhere. The lofty idea men had of misfortune prevented them from despising these unfortunates, but the nature of their disease made it necessary to isolate them. Francis had always felt an intense horror of them. When he passed the hospital where they were lodged, this dainty voluptuary would hold his nose. One day when he was riding in the country he met one of these miserable creatures on the road. With his native honesty, Francis realised that the decisive test was offered to him, and that if he was really changed, now was the moment to prove it. Drawing up by the man, he sprang to the ground. His heart throbbed, no doubt. The leper, turning his ravaged face to him, murmured a prayer for alms. Francis gave them without haste, and then, assailed by the horrible sickly odour he had never been able to endure, he took the diseased hand and kissed it. His heart was filled with

a tempest of joy. The obstacle that had seemed insuperable became as nothing once he had overcome it. With the promptitude of the soldier he pressed his advantage by going at once to the lazar house, to bestow on others the same kindness he had offered to the first. Thenceforth these unfortunates were always especially dear to him. He called them our Christian brothers, implying thus the duty of serving them. They were to remind him of the first victory of his love.

Certain himself of the change he had undergone, it remained to manifest it to those who had known him. There must always be a great drama in the case of one who is becoming himself, while those around him remain what they are. He parts from them, not deliberately, but because he himself is pressing forward. Convenience, laziness, the involuntary prejudice which makes each one of us believe that others are simple and that we alone are complex make our companions insist that we must not disturb their pre-conceived ideas of us. But

nowhere is this insistence so urgent as in small towns, where the parts to be played are distributed once for all. Francis had been the protagonist; he had to remain so. Pleasure had been for him but the first stage on the road, the wayside inn where he had spent a night. For the people of Assisi, it was the dwelling he was never to quit. Nevertheless, he tried to find occupations to serve as an issue for the forces at work within him. There was a little church on the road dedicated to Saint Damian. Aged and decrepit, it was giving up its soul to the winds with its dust. One day, when Francis was praying there he confessed his anguish to the crucifix over the altar with such fervour that he heard the Christ answer him and bid him rebuild the church. Francis took this grandiose order literally, and determined to restore Saint Damian. As money was required, he did not hesitate; he seized some bales of cloth in his father's warehouse, and went to Foligno where he sold them as well as the horse he had ridden. Then

he took the money to the priest of the church, an old man who had already received alms from Francis. This time, however, he thought the amount too large to accept without knowing whether the young man was acting with the consent of his parents. Francis threw down the purse on the window-sill and thought no more of it. From that time forth he remained at Saint Damian, leading a life of prayer and retirement, nourished more or less sufficiently by the old priest. His father, distressed by his vagaries, heard of his whereabouts and went to fetch him home. Francis had thus an opportunity to declare what he had become. But he was not yet ready for this ordeal, and he hid like a child. Soon, however, he felt that he must make some such opportunity as the one he had missed, for he had to acknowledge to himself that he was leading a life of solitude, not because he had forgotten the world, but because he feared it. He felt that he must return to the little town whose roofs he saw smoking in the sun

and bear witness to his new faith. He determined to go back at once to Assisi.

This was one of the decisive moments in a sublime life. Francis, in rags, with disordered hair, made his way to the city he had dazzled in his brilliant adolescence. Scarcely had he entered it, scarcely was he recognised, when all the children of Assisi were after him, shouting and throwing stones at him. His father came out of his shop at the noise. When he saw that his son was the object of the insults and the cause of the scandal, he rushed at him, dragged him into the house, and shut him up in a closet where he kept him prisoner. He thought to get the better of his son by these measures. But Francis was indomitable. Neither threats nor blows could move him from the resolution he had made to live with God. Meanwhile Pietro di Bernardone went away on a journey, and the young man's mother, in her turn, sought to persuade him by the words that move us through the weakness that abides in us

from our cradles, but Francis was proof even against her gentleness. Then, finding her son stedfast, and distressed to see him suffer, she set him free. Everyone is in his place in these old stories, and plays his appointed part. It is the function of fathers to oppose an eccentric vocation by an obstacle on which it will prove its strength. It is the sublime function of mothers to enable their sons to leave them. When Pietro di Bernardone returned and found Francis at liberty he was furiously angry. He clamoured for the money his son had received for the cloth and the horse he had sold, nor was he satisfied when the purse was found intact where Francis had left it, and brought back to him. He haled his son before the Bishop, to force him to give up all he had received from him, and to renounce all rights of heritage. But Francis did much more than was demanded of him. That he might henceforth owe nothing to his father, he stripped off his clothing and naked, renounced him, to devote himself to God.

The Bishop wrapped the young man in his own mantle.

There is a terrible splendour in this moment. For once, Francis seems harsh and pitiless. This soul which loved all created things was to have its instant of sternness. This man who cherished even thieves and brigands, even the humblest creatures of the lowest stage of existence, wounded deeply two hearts, those which the normal man respects most. In the apotheosis of Francis, if all living things hasten to give him thanks, and if the birds wing their way joyously to him, his victims might also be summoned and two would then appear: his father, showing the wound he had received, his mother hiding hers. There is no more signal example of the truth that it is impossible to rise to a higher life without shattering that one has led hitherto. It is, of course, easy to disguise the cruelty of this rupture by belittling Pietro di Bernardone. But this is to minimise the poignancy of the tragedy. The greatest are those in which no one is to blame.

Francis' father, too, must be understood. We must imagine the indignation he felt on seeing his son pursued and insulted by all the ragamuffins of Assisi. In his grief there was more of disappointed love than of wounded pride, and indeed his pride and his love were closely allied. He must often when he was toiling have dwelt with pleasure on the thought that his son would be able to lead a higher life, though he could not foresee how this wish would be granted. He has been reproached for his avarice, but if he claimed his money so insistently may it not have been because, in a drama beyond his comprehension, he clung with a kind of desperation to the point where his rights seemed incontestable? Pietro could not have been a niggard, since he had always provided the sums Francis had spent so gaily, and up to the time of his vocation the youth had been able to gratify all his fancies. Pietro has also been blamed for his violence; but many men, when they cannot explain the opposition of those they love, can only show anger when what they

feel is pain. Francis' father cannot have done nothing but scold. He too, must have tried to reason with his son and soften him. But how could he succeed where a mother had failed? It was doubtless necessary that Francis should be inflexible. But it would be superficial indeed to despise Pietro di Bernardone. The merchant of Assisi, honest, grave, laborious, holding fast to an ideal, stands for the life of his age; for commerce innocent of fraud and falsehood, on which the sacred pictures on the walls might look; for long journeys in wind and rain, risks accepted, equitable profits, faithful conjugal love held fast in spite of the temptations of road and inn; for cares not apparent on the face that must reassure the whole household; for fasts observed and feasts celebrated between the gaiety of good wine and a cheerful fire. For honest virtue, in short, preparing and sustaining something it cannot understand. Blessings on thee in thy degree, Pietro di Bernardone!

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So Francis was free, if it be indeed liberty for a man to be able to carry out his most ardent wish. He began by exerting himself strenuously in the rebuilding of churches. There is a touching artlessness in this activity. He would seem to be attempting to do in a material manner what he did not yet know how to do spiritually. Meanwhile, one morning when he was hearing mass at the Portiuncula, the priest read the passage of the Gospel where Christ gives the Apostles their rule and their law. These words were the order of God to Francis. He determined to obey them literally, to go about the world without money, without scrip, without cloak or shoes or staff, to preach love and announce peace. Thus his formation was accomplished; he had proved to himself the new man he had become; he had proved it to others. After having won his liberty, he had learnt how to use it. He ceased to be an exception and became an example. We must imagine him at this moment with all his radiance, but alone as yet in

the presence of humanity, like a small magnet confronting an enormous mass of filings. The first grain of this mass detached itself—a rich and important citizen of Assisi, Bernardo di Quintavalle. He has a right to the title of the first disciple which tradition accords him, for Tommaso da Celano only mentions before him a pious man whose name he does not give and who disappears like a shadow. Then came a jurisconsult, Pietro dei Cattanei, a priest, Brother Sylvester and that Brother Giles, in whom the pure Franciscan spirit was to live; others again. It is remarkable that in a few months, and in that small region, Francis should have moved and stirred and attracted a whole group of men. This shows what were the aspirations of souls in that age, and we recognise clearly the diversity of epochs. That Francis should have been greeted with stones and derision when he returned in rags from Saint Damian to Assisi was an occurrence not peculiar to his day, but common to all ages. But that the same man by the

mere virtue of his example should have so soon persuaded others to renounce all the ease of life for a voluntary destitution was a phenomenon peculiar to the Middle Ages. When he had gathered together eleven disciples, according to his first biographers, or twelve, according to others, and felt sure of what he wanted to do with them, he went to Rome to ask for the Pope's approval of the Rule he had fixed. At the moment when Francis appears as a leader at the head of those who wish to follow him, it is time to consider him as what he was and what he wished to be, but to understand him we must first set aside all the trivial conventional ideas of sainthood. Far from being necessarily vowed to abstention and abstinence, saints may be the most exacting of all souls, and this is especially true of Saint Francis; no one had a more lively appetite for life than he, and the eagerness of the normal man was as nothing to his. They only differed from one another in their conceptions of its plenitude. The ordinary mortal

does not separate his soul from his ego; wherever he sees that ego fulfilled with satisfactions and enjoyments, puffed up with the pride of possessions or of power, he hails the glory of a larger life. The saint, on the other hand, believes that all enlargement of spirit comes from self-forgetfulness, that he can only exalt his soul by escaping from his ego. To his mind it is the ordinary man who is content with little, who wastes his time in absurd efforts and contests, and so dies before he has begun to live. Far from being privations in his eyes, the renunciations Francis exacted from himself were for him the conditions of an ardent life. It is thus we must understand the three vows of the Minor Order. The vow of obedience is symbolised by a yoke, but as a fact it tends less to enslave than to liberate the monk. Those who were subjected to military discipline in the late war were suddenly relieved from the irksome task of arranging their own lives; even amidst the dangers and difficulties that surrounded them, the

result of this abdication was such a feeling of independence and release that they were amazed at their unexpected happiness. Their satisfaction may give some faint idea of that of Francis when he resigned the government of his person to others. But we must not rob these vows of their grandeur by lending them an air of facility. The vow of obedience aims at nothing less than the breaking of the individual. It may become the most terrible of tyrannies when it attempts to rob him of his conviction and his very thought, and to condemn him to a kind of intellectual suicide. Whatever the radiance in which such dramas may occasionally end, none are more tragic. But the nature of Francis preserved him from sufferings of this kind. He did not live by the mind. The obligation of obedience threatened only the revolts of pride and vanity, against which he himself was warring with his whole heart.

The vow of chastity was to Francis merely freedom to love everything. It

is desire that fetters love. Every man who ponders his own life a little cannot but dream when he recognises how much of enthusiasm, faith, and joy has been caught and imprisoned in the snare of the body. In vowing himself to chastity, Francis, who always retained something of the child, found once more the independence of the childish soul, the heedlessness with which it throws itself upon all it loves. Confronted with the multitudes of creation, he was possessed by the ecstasy of loving them all; in the glory and splendour of innocence he realised the impure dream of the libertine, which is to renounce no one. But it was in the absolute way in which he understood the vow of poverty that Francis entered upon the most sudden and direct road towards a sublime life. He saw that nothing corrupts the soul more surely than the fact of possession, and that our basest instincts gather and concentrate about this dark point. Possessions and bonds were to him the same thing. The average man is no less

the thrall of money if he possesses than if he lacks it; hoarding or coveting, he is still its slave. Francis escaped either degradation by his radiant poverty, and thus the deliverance begun by the other vows was consummated. Even in his worldly period, he had shown a lordly contempt for money. In all his utterances that have come down to us he speaks of it as a thing unclean. Now and again a sparkling jest seems to play about his denunciations: when he ordains that should one of his disciples have amassed or hoarded any sum for any purpose short of absolute necessity or for a sick person, he shall be looked upon by the rest as a false brother, a thief, a robber until he has repented, he adds, as a term of extreme reprobation that he shall be esteemed "a proprietor." This horror of money was so intense that it even dominated his charity. One day travelling in Apulia with a brother, he saw lying on the road, a fat purse, such as those merchants use to carry their gold. Francis' companion

proposed to take it and devote the money it might contain to the poor. But the saint would not yield to his arguments and they went their way. The brother, however, was distressed by the thought that the windfall they had neglected might have given them the means for liberal alms. He urged the point so strongly that Francis, for his edification, agreed to retrace their steps. They accordingly returned and saw the great purse in the middle of the road. Francis knelt in prayer and told his companion to go and take it. The other advanced, not without misgivings, and as he took hold of it, a viper escaped from it. "This," said the master, "is what money is for the servants of God."

Thus by observation of his vows the soul of Francis appears to enjoy a kind of exuberance; nothing can blight or obstruct it. But there is a word to be said here. Rigorous as was the penury in which he had elected to live, he might, had he desired a compensation, have found one in his love of nature. A man

so alive to all the beauty of the world could not open his eyes without being loaded with gifts, and having nothing, was the freer to possess all things. It was certainly a delight for him to feel himself no longer set apart from the world by the walls of a house, but barely separated from it by the partition of a hovel, by a hurdle of reeds through which the whistle of the wind passed freely. Where another would merely have suffered from the cold he assuredly enjoyed sleeping in winter beside the thick velvet of the snow. Nature was in truth the palace of this homeless one, and it may be said of him that for the treasure of gold coins he rejected, he was given a treasure of stars. He was the poor man of society and the rich man of the universe.

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Next we have Francis in the presence of Pope Innocent. Before we dwell on the significance of this interview, we may note some surprise at the facility with which it was brought about. The

supreme authorities of those times were at once more august and more familiar than those of our own day. The society of which they were the summit both raised them to greater heights and restricted them less. Each individual had a claim on them by virtue of his conception of them. Thus when Joan of Arc, whose frankness, courage and simplicity made her somewhat akin to St. Francis, went to the Dauphin, she ended by getting what she would from him by acting on what he was in the name of what he should have been. It is when they feel less sure of themselves that these supreme authorities become more surly, and in spite of egalitarian rhetoric the sense of human solidarity must have weakened, for now the poor and humble can no longer approach the heads of the organisation to which they belong as freely as of old.

It was indeed a solemn moment that brought Francis and Innocent face to face. The two principles that strive for the mastery of the world were confronted :

on the one side, recognised and consecrated authority, a man invested with unrivalled dignity, but who, may be, owed everything to his office; on the other, that more authentic superiority, inherent in the individual, but shrouded perhaps in the garb of poverty; on the one side, he whose function it is to preserve, on the other, he who has power to make all things new. The mediæval painters felt the majesty of this encounter. In the little picture by Sassetta representing the scene, the secondary persons, cardinals and monks, are seen disappearing at the bottom of the panel. But above, the halo round the head of the Saint answers to the tiara that crowns the Pontiff. As in those Alpine landscapes where the great things of Nature face each other, above the confused valleys where men dwell, we seem to behold the moon of Holiness floating towards the mountain of Power. But it is only in the idealistic representation of such a scene that the two confronted principles could appear in such majestic

equality. Nearly always in reality the grandeur of the individual yields to the importance of office, and genius has at times shown its impatience at being thus subordinated to a superiority less real than its own. Such a feeling, however, was far indeed from St. Francis; he never even suspected his own greatness. He had come in all simplicity to ask for permission to live like Christ. Yet in examining him, Innocent performed one of the most difficult functions of his office. Heresy was creeping in on every side. As the Church became more and more concerned with temporal things, it was natural that austere souls should look for the principles of a holier life beyond its pale; on the other hand, it happened that moral disorder was often intermingled with mystic aspirations, and that in the various sects there were both persons who longed to be purer than ordinary believers and others who were much less so. The Vaudois only condemned the vices of the priests. The Catharists attacked dogma. They were Manichæans. They

were not confined to the south of France. In Italy itself they had spread to the very gates of Rome and at Orvieto they had even dared to kill the Podestà appointed by the Pope. Where did hypocrisy or error begin? The Umiliati of Verona went about preaching on the highways. Penitent heretics, led by Durand of Huesca, undertook to give the example of submission to the Church, but the majority of the bishops doubted their sincerity. It was natural that Innocent should be thinking of these things in the presence of the man prostrate at his feet, but it is quite certain that Francis did not think of them. For the Pope was living in his age, and Francis was living outside it. Innocent was benevolent and prudent. He called Francis' attention to the drawbacks of a rule too rigorous, he advised him to enter one of the existing Orders, and finally he gave oral sanction to his Rule, with permission to preach, so that the little band returned home happily. Francis must have rejoiced to find himself in the country

again, with permission to be himself. Nothing could have been more sincere than his submission, but to tell the truth, it was allied to a great audacity, the audacity of attaching itself directly to the Gospel, as that of Joan had been obedience to her voices. Lacking such boldness, neither the one nor the other of them could have existed, but it was so inherent in the soul of each that they were unconscious of it. We are only aware of those of our qualities which are in fact distinct from us and on the borderlines of our natures. Those truly characteristic of us disappear to our sight in the central flame of our ego, where we do not discern them. Thus Francis was unconscious of his audacity, but was aware of his docility. It was that of a child. He had not sought counsel or permission for the constitution of his Order, but when once this was established he could not rest until he had lodged and sheltered it within the Church. He differs entirely from all founders of sects; he was no rebel, not even a reformer. His

St. Francis gives his cloak to a poor man

was a higher function; he was a revealer. If he changed the world it was not by attacking what already existed, but by adding something that did not exist. Rebels entangle themselves for ever in that which they seek to destroy. Francis, on the contrary, at once found the sphere proper to his work. He submitted to the ecclesiastical hierarchy out of filial obedience and natural humility, but had these sentiments been insufficient, he would have submitted in order to be freed by the superiors he recognised from all that hampered and distracted him, that so he might give himself up to the one thing of moment to him: the manifestation of love. His conduct towards the priesthood was of supreme good sense. The clergy of his day were living in great moral disorder and simony was prevalent. The Vaudois denounced these vices. Francis did not deny their existence, but he did not deign to see them. Whatever priests might be individually, he respected them all indiscriminately for their sacerdotal character.

"If," he said, "I should chance to meet at the same moment a Saint from Heaven and a poor priest, I should first kiss the hands of the priest. I should say: Wait a bit, Saint Lawrence, for these hands touch the Word of Life and have a superhuman power." But it would seem then that Francis was willing to leave these priests, whom he revered, without knowing them, in their sins, that he was able to forget these. It may be, however, that he worked on them more by acting thus than if he had attacked them. Respect has such power that it sometimes forces those who enjoy without deserving it, to try to be worthy of it. The assumption that one who has erred is still what he should be may bring him back to the fold, and even should this result not be attained, the nobility of a function is preserved from the ignominy of a man. The ostensible veneration Francis showed to priests reminded others of the eminent dignity of priesthood more effectually than criticism and invective would have done, and moreover, it obviated contests

that would have diverted him from his true aims. His conduct was inspired solely by his great and simple conception of things, but the most subtle skill could not have availed him more. What a noble and convenient device is respect!

III

The Three Phases

FRANCIS now confronts mankind, having behind him not only his few disciples, but the shining array of his own forces. This is the point at which to mark the phases of his life, the more so because the observations to be made in his case have a general bearing. For however free the development of a superior nature may be, it is neither arbitrary nor fortuitous; it has its definite periods and seasons, to be found more or less evidently in the destinies of all great men; the only difference between them and Francis is that they are conscious of what is happening to them, whereas he was all unconscious. The pattern of their lives is charged with pride, effort, ambition, anger; with Francis things were reduced to the essential; he added nothing to it, but the bare line he thus traces before us sings all the more clearly the fateful drama of the man and of men.

First there is the radiant period of joy, when the great man invades mankind. Humanity, apparently off its guard, allows itself to be surprised, and offers no resistance to the onslaught of genius. The ancient world of ugliness and selfishness seems about to vanish, making way for another. We think of those days in March, when the old morose winter landscape, invested, harried, and occupied by the dazzling army of flowering trees, capitulates to a new power. But even as we admire this period another begins. The first was marked by the invasion of the great man, the second is marked by the revulsion of men in their relation to him. He has then to learn what differences divide him from the multitude he believed he had conquered. It is not only those who resist him who make him sensible of the limits of his power. He realises that he has not been able to change even those he has won. In this struggle of one against many there are moments when these seem to overwhelm their adversary; we see him no more.

Certain great men have never emerged from this second phase, either because they have become dependent on human mediocrity through the very bitterness it has inspired in them, or because by a degradation more specious but no less certain they have been caught and submerged in the density of their own glory. Only a few arrive at the third stage, and of these Saint Francis was one. In this serene autumn the great man completed himself and saw that he could suffice to himself. Though his affection or his love for those he had known remained unchanged he was no longer mistaken as to the quality of the ties between them, and recognised his right to develop above them. His faith was doubtless unabated, but his credulity was a thing of the past. Even when crowds flocked to him the brilliance of his triumph did not blind him to the limitations of his victory. Thus it may be said that if no accident hampers or interrupts his regular development, the great man begins with a solitude in which he prepares himself and ends

with a solitude in which he completes himself, his relations with other men filling the valleys between these two summits. He finds himself, gives himself, and finds himself once more. Such was the case of Saint Francis. He began and ended with God, and was with men only for the interlude. He began and ended in joy, but how different was that which preceded experience and that which followed it, the artless joy of the early days when he thought that everything would yield to him, and that supreme state when the melancholy that might have been induced by man was swallowed up in the joy that came from God.

IV

The First Phase

LET us now contemplate Francis in the first of these three phases, when the Order he had founded still belonged to him. The life of the brethren shines with a morning brightness. They were living in all the independence of poverty; the obligations they had accepted released them from all that fetters and burdens man, and when they came down to earth from ecstasy or prayer, the gaiety that charms us in them was but the lowest degree of their happiness. Their life, based upon that of the Apostles, was gentler and happier, because it was embraced in a system already established, and even their poverty rested on the golden background of their worship. They were clad in gowns of the colour of ashes and girded with the cord which Dante says makes those who wear it leaner. They found shelter in some shed or some forsaken church; the scanty

food they kept over from one day for another they stored in one of those underground Etruscan tombs still to be found in the country. The peasant, passing by their refuge at dawn saw the glimmer of a light, heard the chant of mattins, and commended his life of toil to the protection of a higher life. These first brethren were the best, because a personal impulse brought them to Francis, before the great influx into the Order. Each one of them seemed to draw from the Saint some special quality, to absorb it into himself. There was the good Brother Bernard, unswervingly faithful to the vow of poverty, whose virtuous and saintly life was rewarded by a marvellously easy death. There was Brother Giles, perhaps the most perfect Franciscan of them all, whose soul was full of love and whose wit was not without an edge. There was Brother Angelo, the first knight who joined the Order, and whom Francis loved because he had preserved all his ancient courtesy in his new gentleness. There was Brother Masseo,

handsome, stately, and loquacious. When he and Francis went begging together, Masseo got all the titbits, while Francis, frail and sickly, was given only the crusts, and this inequality amused the Saint who used to tease his companion about it as they made their way back. Masseo, like Giles, died at a great age. At the end of his life he had a habit, when in contemplation or ecstasy, of making a sort of cooing noise like a dervish. A young friar, irritated by this sound, asked the old man why he did not find some other means of expressing his joy. Masseo turned his once handsome face, curiously ennobled by the austerities of monastic life, to the young man and replied: "Because he who has but one joy has but one song."

Then there was Brother Rufino, always lost in prayer. One day when another friar told him to go and get some bread, Rufino, anxious to show his zeal, answered in stammering syllables, being in such haste to reply that he had not waited for his spirit to come down again into his

body. There was Brother Leo, the sheep of God, who had been the Saint's Confessor, and who, having heard Francis avow his faults knew better than any man the clearness of that soul in which there was no shadow. There was Brother Juniper, who enlivened the delicate life of the fraternity by light garlands of raillery. There was John the simple soul. He was a peasant who having seen Francis sweeping a church was so touched by his industry that he left his ancient calling to join him. Having been instructed that he was to follow his master's example in all things, he took the recommendation literally; when Francis knelt or rose in church, John did the same; if Francis sighed, John also sighed. The Saint, who was witty, and who had nicknamed a greedy and idle monk Brother Fly, might have called his artless imitator Brother Shadow.

Finally, not far from the monks dwelt Saint Clare, a feminine replica of Saint Francis. It was he who on his return from Rome had dedicated her to God

and had cut off her hair, taking from that head of eighteen years the youthful gold that was to be replaced by a tardy aureole. Clare had torn herself from the world by an heroic effort, and her example had attracted certain women, among them her sister Agnes, whom she governed at San Damiano as Francis governed his brethren. The relation between the two groups was maintained, and thus these men who had renounced everything were in contact with all that is purest in feminine influence.

In their poverty the gifts of the earth came to them directly, without the intervention of money. The peasants brought them fruit and herbs. They themselves, having to pay a fee to the Benedictines of Mount Subiaso, who had let them the ground at Portiuncula, discharged the debt with a basket of small fish. A poor woman with crippled fingers who had been cured by Francis hastened home and decided that she could make no better use of her restored hands than by preparing a certain cheese for which she had been famous; she

offered this cheese to the Saint, and Francis, with his usual courtesy, ate a little of it.

The real trouble of poverty is the inability to give. Francis, in order to give alms when he had renounced all property, sometimes had recourse to arduous and ingenious devices in which his playful humour found expression. The brethren sought in vain to prevent him from depriving himself of necessaries for persons who imposed upon his charity. Not only did he evade all their precautions, he even managed at times to engage them in his largesse, in the name of the vows they had taken. Once in cold winter weather an old woman asked him for alms. Francis was wearing as a cloak a piece of cloth given him by a pious man. He took it from his shoulders and gave it to her. Astonished and delighted, the old crone seized it with her crooked fingers and made off in haste, fearing it might be taken from her. Then having cut up the cloth to ensure her possession and made a dress for herself,

she came back to ask for a piece more to finish it. The companion of the Saint was indignant at this effrontery. He also was wearing a cloak of the same sort. Francis looked at him: "In the name of God" he began. No more was needed. The monk was already pulling off his wrap.

When beggars came to Francis in one of the Chapels served by the Minor Brethren, he thought he could not please God better than by stripping the altars and giving their ornaments to the poor. When he was importuned on the highway and had absolutely nothing to bestow, he would take off his tunic and offer it. He would never deign to consider whether his goodness had been imposed upon. All gifts in his eyes had a virtue of their own. He no more thought it possible to be a dupe in giving than we can account ourselves dupes in receiving.

The background to these deeds at once marvellous and simple is always the Umbrian landscape in its firm suave beauty. Never has nature so associated

itself with the life of a man in any Western country. We cannot picture Francis walking along a road without thinking of the wild flower opening its childish eye by the roadside to see him pass. We cannot recall the hovels where he sought shelter for his slumbers without seeing the constellations rising over the roof to keep their splendid silent watch. The mountain was linked to him by the wolf it sent him, the wolf whose ferocity he subdued, the lake by the great fish that circled round his boat and would not leave it till duly blessed and dismissed, the country-side by garlands of birds. The supernatural world entered into the life of the brethren no less familiarly than nature, and to them was one with it. The Devil prowled round their band, but he had not the power over this elect body that he acquired later over the mass of monks, and he was always baffled, humiliated and derided. Heaven had no abysses for them. The lower edge of Paradise touched the ridges of their roofs and their relations with it increased as

their earthly contacts diminished. At a time when the brethren were living in a rustic house in retirement, an angel came knocking at the door one day. He had taken on the appearance of a handsome young man with curling hair, but preserving his real nature beneath this disguise he knocked with such triumphant vigour that the whole convent shook. The porter, Brother Masseo, was startled, and opening, saw a stranger in the garb of a pilgrim. "Whence art thou, my son, that thou knockest in so strange a fashion?" "How should I have done?" asked the innocent, turning his radiant face to the brother. "First," said Masseo, "thou shouldst knock quietly, three times. Then, after waiting the space of a Pater, if the porter does not come, knock once more." After this benign remonstrance the stranger asked to see Brother Elias. Masseo went to fetch him, but Elias, who was proud and ill-tempered, replied that he would not put himself out for an unknown youth. Masseo was perturbed,

for, thought he, if I say Elias will not receive him, he will not be edified, and if I say he cannot that will not be true. While he was hesitating loud and repeated knocking was heard. Masseo hastened to the door. "Truly," he said, "thou hast not greatly profited by my lessons in the art of knocking!" The stranger answered: "Brother Elias will not come, but go thou to Brother Francis; tell him I did not address myself to him, because I would not disturb him at prayer, but that I ask him to send Brother Elias to me." Masseo went and found Francis not far from the convent, lost in contemplation, with head uplifted and arms extended. He gave the pilgrim's message. Francis, without change of attitude, said: "Go and command Brother Elias on my behalf, by holy obedience, to see this young man." Elias obeyed reluctantly and opening the door roughly asked the stranger what he wanted. The young man fixed his beaming eyes on the monk: "Beware of anger, Brother, for anger troubles the

soul and obscures the truth." "Tell me what thou desirest?" said the Brother. "I would ask whether those who observe the holy Gospel may eat all that is set before them, and whether anyone can be allowed to restrict the liberty given them by Christ." The question touched Elias to the quick, for he, as Vicar of the Order, had, contrary to the precept and sentiment of Francis, forbidden the brethren to eat meat. He answered rudely: "I know all this better than thou, but I will not tell thee." And he went away. Then, conscious of his fault, he returned and opened the door again, but the stranger had disappeared.

The same day Brother Bernard, returning from Compostella, came to the banks of a river swollen by rains and knew not how to cross it. He saw before him a young man who said: "God give thee peace, Brother." Bernard, charmed by his beauty and his gentle greeting, asked him whence he came. "I come," replied the youth, "from the place where Francis dwells, I wished to speak to him,

but since I would not disturb him in his prayers I saw only Brother Masseo and Brother Elias. Brother Masseo taught me how to knock at a door, Brother Elias would not answer a question I asked him, then he was sorry, but when he came back I was no longer there. But tell me thyself, what is detaining thee here?" Bernard pointed to the river. "Give me thy hand," said the stranger, "and fear nothing." The monk obeyed and in a moment they were on the other side. Then Bernard had no further doubts, and full of joy and reverence he said to the unknown: "Fair angel of God, what is thy name?" "My name is Marvel," replied the angel, and then, as if he were not allowed to stay after he had made himself known, he vanished.

Francis and his brethren neither lived among men nor apart from them. Francis had always hesitated between the vocations of praying and preaching, and in his perplexities he asked counsel of certain of his companions and of Saint Clare. It is easy to guess that he would have

preferred contemplation but with a nature so flexible and selfless, it must have sufficed him to think that he would please God more by choosing the task less congenial to him, and forthwith his preference was reversed and he ended by desiring most what he had least desired at first. It must be added that Christ Himself by His example enjoined the choice of preaching, and that in his period of credulity Francis certainly hoped that his preaching would change the world. Yet nothing was more alien to him than the conception of a preaching monk offering a devout people the unquenchable flood of his easy eloquence. Francis did not flow like a fountain, he gushed forth like a mountain spring. Preaching for him was but a means of pouring out among men what he had amassed in retreat. Far from giving up the Minor Brethren to the crowd, he wished them to carry their solitude with them when they travelled in pairs. "Let your conversation be without reproach on the road as in your cells. For

wherever we go we have our cells with us; our cell is our brother, the body; the soul is the hermit who shuts himself up in it to pray and meditate, and if he is not in peace and solitude there, it is of little use for the monk to inhabit a cell built by man." It was thus he lived himself in a meditation from which he emerged to preach. If there ever was an eloquence that scorned eloquence it was surely his. He was so free from the usual vanity of the orator, sacred or profane, that when inspiration failed him he would simply give his blessing to the multitude assembled to hear him and send them away. Nor must it be supposed that he spoke in honeyed words. His speech was vehement, but he did not wound souls, he roused them. Without rhetoric, without dialectic, lacking, or rather casting away the ordinary artifices and devices, he surprised hearts and captured them before they knew it. A poet surfeited with honours and accustomed to all the refinements of worldly life, crowned king of verse by

the Emperor, trembled on his pedestal of pride at the fervent speech of the monk, and felt that the true poet was this man in rags, who spoke without art. He entered the Order and Francis gave him the name of Brother Pacificus. The Saint preached the same year to the Cardinals and to the birds, and was no more astonished at the one event than at the other. Yet when he was to preach before the Curia, his friend, Cardinal Ugolino, begged him to prepare his sermon. The princes of the Church in those days were by no means uncultured, and Ugolino feared that one so simple might not appear to advantage before these doctors. With his usual docility Francis did as he was told. But when the time came, he forgot everything. Unperturbed, he begged the Pope to give him his blessing, and then spoke with such inspiration and enthusiasm that he moved his feet and hands rhythmically, the while Ugolino, fearing the help of the Spirit might fail him, prayed fervently for him. I cannot but compare the two

scenes; on the one hand the sedate Cardinals in their hats and great copes, grave and silent; on the other the attentive birds, the fascinated blackbird, the bullfinch in pink and grey, the dun larks, the tit bending forward on its branch and almost forgetting to keep its hold. Francis would speak with equal good faith to both audiences, but he would certainly have preferred the birds.

None could resist his words. At Cannara, when he had finished his sermon, the whole populace wished to follow him. At Ascoli thirty men, clerks and laymen, received the habit from his hands. When he approached a town the bells rang, the houses sent out their children like a flock of sparrows to greet him, men left their work and hastened to him, and just as the workman had thrown aside his tools and women their distaffs it seemed as if the miser had thrown off his greed, the brutal his violence, the lascivious his impurity, and that those who flocked round Francis were a people innocent

and regenerate. The Saint was too holy to be touched in the slightest degree by vainglory, but what hopes he must have conceived in the presence of such transports! We recognise the intoxication of confidence in his manner of distributing the world among his disciples like a conqueror with his lieutenants. He sent them to Germany, Spain and Morocco, reserving France for himself, as the country he had always preferred. But it could only have attracted him by the joy he hoped to find there. Islam tempted him even more, because of the danger it offered. In respect of this mass of infidel souls Francis must have felt like a little flame before a huge heap of dry wood. Perhaps he fancied it would be easier to bring these unbelievers from one extreme to the other than to kindle a fervent faith in the lukewarm believers around him. And, finally, the real attraction was his thirst for martyrdom. It was natural that Francis should desire martyrdom as the greatest proof of love he could give to God, and the most

direct means of union with Him. But as he grew older this desire, we may suppose, became more intense and less ingenuous. A lofty soul, especially one of extreme sensibility, no longer restrained by material interests, has always a secret desire for death. Living in a world which is not his world and where everything offends him, he is always readier than one would suppose to leave it, more especially when it is not only lawful but laudable to accept the means of escape. When we find Francis returning again and again to his idea of going to the East, in spite of all obstacles, we may ask whether he was not attracted by the thought of leaving a world where things were less and less to his liking, as much as by the hope of converting the infidel. When Saint Bonaventura tells how Francis was prevented by illness from leaving Spain to go to Morocco, he writes: "Although he thought that to him to die would be gain, he returned to the care of the sheep entrusted to him." The first part of the sentence is only a

quotation from the Epistle to the Philippians. Yet it is difficult not to see a deep significance in it when we remember the ever increasing disappointments encountered by Francis in the governance of his Order. Such thoughts add a touch of unwonted bitterness to our picture of the soul of the Saint. It is because we are no longer concerned with the first phase.

V

The Second Phase

WE are now entering upon the second phase, no longer lyric, but dramatic, that stage of experience in which the exceptional being learns to know ordinary men, and by them to know himself. This trial occurs in every great life, but it is sometimes difficult to recognise it, because it disappears in the gilded falsehood of glory. When we picture to ourselves the life of a great man of earlier days we are inclined to give him a manifest advantage over all his contemporaries. In most cases, however, this was non-existent: either his superiority was not recognised, or the difference between him and others served only to set him as one against all. Our error is due to the fact that most of his adversaries have disappeared when we are contemplating the spectacle of his fate; they have fallen into the abyss of nothingness that awaited them. But

during his lifetime they too seemed alive; they spoke, acted, gave sentence, ephemeral delegates of eternal inferiority! It is true that with Francis we are on a higher plane, where there is no further question of pride or glory. But far from having been suppressed altogether, the drama of his encounter with mankind is merely reduced to the essential. The experience he acquired therefrom must have begun with his relations with the brethren. He saw on more than one occasion that he had not been able to transform them so far as to have made them cast off certain faults and instincts of their old life. Careful as Francis was to redouble his humility the more he was glorified, he was unable to neutralise a certain bitterness in the souls of his companions in view of his triumphs. Men will consent to the glorification of one unknown to them, for he is but a phantom who cannot wound their vanity. But they cannot readily suffer the elevation of one of themselves to superiority. They claim equality more or less with one

with whom they have lived on familiar terms. "Thou art not handsome, noble or learned; why should all the world run after thee?" This was the question put to Francis one day by a beloved disciple. His answer was all humility and candour. But this man to whom every ugliness of the soul gave pain, must have suffered at the coarseness, the hidden malice of such a question. Once when exhausted by fatigue and illness he had agreed to continue his journey on an ass, he suddenly imagined what must be the thoughts of the companion walking beside him. "My parents were better than his and now he is riding and I am going on foot." With his usual eagerness Francis sprang to the ground and knelt before the monk. "No, my brother," he said, "it is not just that thou, who in the world wast nobler and richer than I, shouldst go on foot while I am riding." Thus unmasked the envious brother asked pardon in his turn; but the anecdote shows a somewhat bitter knowledge of the human heart in

the Saint. More than once even among his disciples, he must have felt the little viper of Envy biting his naked feet. We know that he took every opportunity of humiliating himself in public, that he allowed himself to be reviled as the most miserable of sinners. If he acted thus it was in order to crush every germ of pride in his soul. But it may also have been that he hoped thus to disarm the jealousy and criticism of his companions. One winter when he was in Rome, in the house of a Cardinal, he soon rejected the modest comfort of such a domicile. "What would the brethren say," he cried, "they who travel over hill and dale, suffering from hunger, and those others who live in wretched hermitages, if I should be taking mine ease in the Lord Cardinal's house? Would they not be justified if they murmured against me?" Thus, even among those who had given themselves up to him, Francis heard these perpetual murmurs.

He had other adventures, among which we must reckon his journey to the East.

Legend has taken possession of this episode, and we know little about it. We are told that he confounded the doctors of Islam, and that he caused them to retreat by proposing to undergo the ordeal of fire with them. This was a very ordinary proposition not only in Christendom, but among the infidels—and allusions to it, if not actual experiments, abounded. Two centuries later, in Florence, when Savonarola showed that he was afraid to undergo it the people forsook him. Whatever discussions Francis may have taken part in, in Syria or Egypt, he was too ignorant to shine in dialectic; but the Musulman princes were disposed to respect holiness even in a Christian, and Francis in his somewhat crazy imprudence, answered very well to their conception thereof. It is indeed very probable that the Sultan did not treat him harshly; all that he did perhaps was to send the missionary back indulgently, which to our notions was a good deal, but which no doubt seemed very little to Francis. He

returned with a sense of having failed. But the West had a more secret bitterness in store for him, that of success. In the drama of the great man with other men, even when the latter give themselves up in all good faith to him who seeks to change them, we can never know who has really won the victory; whether it is he who has exalted them or they who have held him back. We can never know whether in professing a new faith, they are obeying an implicit desire to escape from their former mediocrity or a stealthy desire to establish it within the principles that threaten it. Great doctrines attract men by their nobility, but this they lose in seeking to retain their adherents. In the alternative that presents itself to a sublime soul, victory brings with it a melancholy more subtle and intestine than defeat, for all success has this advantage, that he who suffers it remains intact and may hope for a reversal of fortune, whereas complete success leaves no further hope where one perceives that under the appearance of

St. Francis undergoes the ordeal by fire

victory it conceals only a compromise, and that this compromise is all that it is possible to obtain. Francis called men and it was his tragedy that they responded.

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To understand the drama in which he was involved we must take into account certain traits of his character. Francis had no social sense. This may seem a weakness in an age which makes idols of economic forces and in which humanity elects to live by its appetites. But so it was. He was no doubt perfectly satisfied in the early days of the Order when the brethren lived from hand to mouth. Material questions did not exist for him. When he had said to himself that God would provide he had not only expressed a pious confidence in Providence, he had offered a solution. There was nothing strange to Francis in the idea that on days when the brethren had nothing to eat, an unknown man or woman would appear at the last moment, bringing what was necessary and would then disappear.

We may be sure that he had no conception of the rigour of natural laws; he would have agreed that miracles are rare, because of the unworthiness of mankind, but it would have seemed to him simple enough to suppose that they would be frequent were we more deserving of them. He did not rely exclusively upon this; he realised how much work contributes to the joy of the soul. He enjoined the brethren to live by alms and toil. But this last point raised a difficulty, for as Francis forbade his disciples to accept the smallest sum of money they could only receive food in payment of their labours, and it was not easy to make agreements on such terms. There was another danger connected with work; the involuntary satisfaction of the worker in his achievement. By this by-path the monk might re-enter the accursed domain of property and possession. Thus on one occasion, when the Saint had modelled a little clay vase, it happened that at a time when he was praying with the brethren his thoughts returned to his

work and dwelt upon it; when the service came to an end, he at once destroyed the paltry object that had distracted his mind from God. If Francis hesitated at first between the tradition of the Rabbis, continued by Saint Paul, who relied upon manual toil for their subsistence, and that of the Gospel, which taught the Apostles to look for it from the hand of God, he was at last led to depend on alms for the maintenance of the brethren, and no solution could have pleased him better. To live on alms seems the vilest of all conditions in a material age, which claims to be the age of work, and is so in fact, if not by the perfection at least by the extent of its activities. But Francis judged otherwise. To him no dignity was greater than that of the poor, those heirs of Jesus Christ. The gift and the renunciation of an object which is all that almsgiving means to us, was to him mere pretext and appearance. Almsgiving is the act in which two brothers recognise each other. If in the equality of this salute one profits

more than the other it is assuredly the rich man, for his gift has been a means of purification for him, and shows that he is not dead to the life of the soul. To send monks begging all over the world was not only to ensure the best conditions of humility and detachment for them; there was the further thought of those who would give to them—the thought of lightening the darkness of the age by kindling the fires of charity.

But these ideas, simple and evident as they were to Francis, could not furnish a basis for the constitution of a great Order. We have only to consider the essential function of the religious Orders to perceive this. In the Church itself, they have the advantage of permitting innovation while avoiding subversion, and of bringing about a renascence of religion within the bounds of the tradition that continues it. Their importance is not less in the social order, and a society that prevents their existence must have lost all sense of human nobility. Every

well constituted society enwraps each individual in a network of relations to others, but it makes a tyranny of its legitimate powers if it seeks to subjugate the entire man. It should accept the existence of something that surpasses it. It should not feel anger at the thought that exceptional ways of living are peacefully suspended above its own level, reminding even those least inclined to practise them that man is not merely a social animal. It is true that the monastic life both in the East and in the West gives rise to abuses justly derided by popular malice; nevertheless, it has a symbolic value and is sufficiently justified if some monks live as all have promised to live. A nation in which these Orders have ceased to exist suffers a certain degradation; it can conceive nothing higher than material delights. Yet the religious Orders, created to allow exceptional souls to escape upwards from social disciplines, without revolt or bravado, can only exist themselves by forming, however succinctly, societies of their

own. Most of them accept this necessity the more readily because it enables them to fulfil the functions for which they were created ; the care of the sick, the prosecution of long studies or the contemplation of divine things. But the case of Saint Francis was altogether different. He was anti-social in essence. His disciples were not destined to live austerely, but to demonstrate poverty absolute. They were to manifest among men, complete disdain of the principles on which all men live. The thing was impossible. Saint Bernard may be imitated, Saint Dominic may be followed, but Saint Francis cannot be reconstituted. He did not himself know how unique he was. His divine simplicity was such, the humility that made him unconscious of his own merit was so perfect, that he readily believed every brother he had snatched from the world would be a replica of himself. As a fact only a small body of men of special gifts, living always with the Saint, perpetually inspired, trained and corrected by him, were able

to realise his dream to some extent. As soon as the Order expanded it formed of necessity a little society in which all the faults of the greater society germinated and these faults, which do not prevent other Orders from living and fulfilling their missions, were mortal to this one Order. No one was to blame; the Franciscan Order as conceived by Saint Francis could not exist.

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Hence the drama in which he struggled; it was not merely the commonplace decline that marks the passage from the dream to the business, whenever some great design has to be put into action. It was a special disability, inherent in the particular character of his attempt. The details of organisation must have been distasteful to him from the first, so little was he fitted to cope with them, and no doubt he was well pleased to rely upon the help of his powerful protectors in Rome. He only resisted when he saw that this organisation was devouring the spirit of his work, and here again we

must admire the discernment with which he attached himself solely to the essential. No one was ever less punctilious or less of a formalist than he. Formalism is merely a rigorous way of remaining on the surface of things, and Francis saw into the depths too clearly to be capable of such a fault. In the portrait he drew of the perfect General of the Order, far from urging upon this authority to exercise all his prerogatives he counsels him rather to relax them when there is a question of saving a soul. Although he had prescribed to everyone entering his Order the duty of giving up all he possessed to the needy, and imperative as he deemed this obligation enjoined by the Gospel, he did not hesitate to relax it in the case of a peasant who could not have obeyed it without ruining all belonging to him ; in this case he allowed the parents of this man to take the place of the poor. Nor was anyone ever less disposed to exact inhuman rigours from others. Even had his kindliness not restrained him his discretion would have

sufficed. To exaggerate macerations is a resource of mediocrity: it seeks to disguise poverty of feeling by the fanatical excess of observance, but the very act by which it would prove itself capable of passion merely shows that it is incapable of good taste. Francis, like Buddha, understood perfectly that extravagant mortifications lead nowhere. The sole object of those he prescribed for his disciples was to subdue the carnal man which gives a hold to devils. With exquisite moderation he writes: "We must provide in temperate fashion for the needs of our brother, the body, lest a tempest of melancholy should arise within us. If we desire that it should not weary in watching and praying, we must not give it any cause to murmur. Otherwise it will say: 'Hunger is killing me, I have no longer strength for the exercise you demand of me.' But if it grumbles after receiving a sufficient ration, let us make the lazy beast feel the spur, let us goad this ass which refuses to get on." In his relations

with the Clares, Francis, far from inciting them to privations, urges them to tempt the appetite of sick Sisters by varying their diet. Later, Saint Clare, in whom the spirit of Saint Francis persisted, wrote in the same strain to the Blessed Agnes of Bohemia, to temper her zeal and enjoin moderation. In the behaviour of the Saint to his disciples traits of gentleness abound. In the early days of the Order one night when the brothers were sleeping in their hovel at Rivo Torto they were awakened by loud cries of: "I am dying, I am dying!" When they had got a light, Francis asked who it was who had cried out. One of the brothers replied, and confessed that he was dying of hunger. Then the gentle creature had the table set at once and lest the hungry one should feel ashamed, he himself sat down to eat with all the rest. This humble meal, animated by the gaiety of the Saint seems a kind of reflection in his monastic life of the nocturnal feasts of his brilliant youth. On another occasion a brother of long standing in the Order

had been ill for some time, and took no care of himself, being wholly absorbed in spiritual things. Francis, full of compassion, thought that grapes might do him good. The next day at dawn he called the brother and took him into a neighbouring vineyard, where he began to take a grape here and there, to encourage his companion to do the same. They returned the next morning, and eventually the sick man recovered. Many a time after the death of Francis he told the story to the younger monks and wept as he recalled the ineffable kindliness of the Saint.

It was only upon essentials that Francis insisted, but here he was unyielding. The points on which he would not give way were ignorance and poverty. No doubt the two were inseparable in his mind, for in his eyes knowledge was but a form of wealth that engendered the same faults as material riches, whereas ignorance might be esteemed a sublime poverty of the spirit, which left perfect liberty for love. To understand Francis'

standpoint we must take account of his nature. He was by no means learned, but on the other hand he was not uncultured. He knew the Latin of the Church, spoke French more or less fluently, and had the romances of chivalry in his head. In all that has come down to us of his sayings there is no word of disparagement of learning. On the contrary, he always showed great respect to the learned, and when he had to give up the government of his Order he chose as his successor, Pietro dei Cattanei, a man versed in theology and canon law. Francis had a most rare and noble quality; he could appreciate the greatness of things of which he thought it necessary to deprive himself. He did not despise knowledge, but he thought it impossible to devote oneself at once to its pursuit and to the life of the spirit, and he was never weary of insisting that divine grace may give the ignorant a wisdom transcending all the learning of doctors. This was the tenet of all the primitive Franciscans; they acknow-

ledged that they were incapable of teaching anything, but when they were inspired by God they insisted that all other voices should be silent. A very learned monk was one day preaching to the nuns and a few brothers in the little bare church of the Clares. Giles interrupted him suddenly: "Silence, Master, I must speak."

The Doctor sat down, pulling his cowl over his forehead in sign of obedience, and Giles spoke with such fervour that his hearers were enraptured. When the support of the spirit failed him, he was silent, like a lark dropping to earth. The preacher then resumed and finished his sermon modestly. Long after the death of Francis this same Giles, then a very old man, went to Saint Bonaventura, who had become the Superior of the Order and was at the height of his fame as a man of learning. "Is it true," asked Giles, "that an ignorant old woman may in her simplicity love God as much as a great theologian like Bonaventura?" The General of

the Order felt the thrust of this question. It was as if a dart of the early Franciscan spirit had suddenly pierced a disciple already unfaithful. Bowing his head in the midst of his arsenal of books he humbly confessed that the thing was possible. But nothing reveals the sentiment of Francis himself on this point more clearly than his treatment of a certain novice, who greatly desired his permission to have a breviary. The Saint, in spite of his kindness, felt unable to grant this request, and one evening when they were sitting by the fire, and the novice renewed his importunities, Francis, in one of those sallies marked by a poetry very strange in the case of one so simple, took a pinch of ashes from the hearth and sprinkled it on the bowed head of the young man, saying: "Here is your breviary, here is your breviary." The explanation he gave of his refusal began with a phrase we may readily accept as authentic. "I too," he said, "formerly wished to have books." If he had renounced them it was because

he considered that knowledge excites pride. "Science puffs up," he said. To see how true this is we have only to look at those whose souls are dried up by the vanity of a worthless learning. It must further be noted that owing to the difference of our century and that of the Saint, most of our pitiful modern savants teach outside the Church, whereas in the thirteenth century they were of it. Had they been admitted into the Order they would at once have killed the ardour, the indifference to material things, even the credulity necessary for the life of the heart. Francis was ready enough to receive those learned men who turned away from learning, but he had to tell those who were pursuing it not to come to him.

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The case was even simpler in the matter of poverty. His disciples were to possess nothing, and failing this there could be no Minor Brotherhood. Francis never wearied of insisting on the indigence

in which they were to live. It is touching to note his attachment to humble churches and mud hovels, and the vague and indefinite terms in which he indicates the places where the monks are to halt on their journeys. He always speaks of places and not of houses. We feel that he feared dwellings and residences for his sons, as one fears snares for birds. He wished to have them barely perching on the tree of the world.

His exactions on this point seem very rigorous at times. One Easter Monday the brothers of Greccio had prepared a humble feast in honour of the occasion. They had spread a cloth upon their table and had substituted glasses that sparkled gaily for the wooden goblets in which they generally drank. Francis noted these preparations and without a word slipped away. As it was customary not to wait for him when he was late the brothers sat down at the appointed hour. They were eating joyously when suddenly someone knocked at the door and asked for alms in the name of God. "Come in,"

St. Francis casts out the Devils from Arezzo

cried the monks. Then Francis entered, in the guise of a beggar, and sat down on the ground near the fire. The monks ate no more, an unbearable discomfort checked their gaiety. They would have liked to take away the cloth, the whiteness of which embarrassed them, and those glasses which were twinkling indiscreetly in a ray of sunshine. At last Francis spoke and told them that the Minor Brothers ought to keep festivals by increased privations. This indeed seems harsh! Not even a frugal feast, not even one day in the year leave to inaugurate the joy of the soul by the pleasure of the body. It must be understood, however, that Francis could not yield on this point without imperilling everything. If he insisted so sternly on the perfect observance of the vow of poverty, it was not only because of the capital importance of this virtue; it was because he who fails in obedience knows it, because he who fails in chastity bears within him the knowledge and shame of his fault, whereas he who fails in poverty

drifts away gradually, and the subtle poison of sin enters into him unawares. Hence the necessity of greater vigilance on this point than on others. The true disciples of Saint Francis were no less rigid on this point than their master. Saint Clare never ceased to demand what she magnificently called the privilege of poverty. She spent her life refusing the indulgences the Pope wished to allow her, and in her last hours she would not die until she held in her hands the bull in which Innocent IV finally sanctioned the severe Rule she had received from Saint Francis. Here again we must evoke Brother Giles. When, fifteen years after the death of Francis, Elias had built the splendid monastery of Assisi, the brothers fetched the aged Giles from Perugia to show him the building. He admired the halls and the galleries, and then, turning to his companions, remarked: "Well, now all you want is women!" When they exclaimed in horror, he replied with merciless logic: "Why should those who disregard the vow of

poverty feel themselves bound by the vow of chastity?"

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We can now understand the drama. If Francis showed supreme energy it was because in defending his work and his ideal he was in fact defending his manner of life. His activities were but the radiation of his nature; but it was inevitable that they should bring him into conflict with forces of resistance. These were not the forces of the Church, but of humanity itself. There is no doubt that his protector Ugolino who, when he became Pope, canonised him, had the deepest admiration for him. But the organisation of the Order was entrusted to him and the Order could not be incorporated without losing something of the spirit of its founder. Beset by difficulties, Francis could not rely upon the original brethren. These simple souls could follow and obey him, but they could not help him. Those who were capable of aiding him in the government of his monks were men unlike himself,

gifted with the social and temporal aptitudes he lacked, and after rejoicing in their qualities at first, he ended by suffering from their characters. Thus Brother Elias' energy was very serviceable to him in the beginning. Elias had been a schoolmaster and men of this calling are as a rule masterful. Elias took great pleasure in ruling and administering the Order; but he withdrew it from its founder. To realise the isolation of Francis we must remember that if ordinary men are sometimes attracted to an exceptional person by an obscure perception of the difference between him and themselves, their sympathy is at once estranged when this difference is no longer vague but makes itself sharply felt in details. Then, without premeditated opposition, they will all be found in concert against him. Francis must have been conscious of the general sentiment of the brethren behind the opposition of Ugolino and Elias. Humanity acts normally when it imposes its inertia on those who try to handle it

too impulsively, and it is perhaps well that it cannot follow genius in its sublime flights. The majority of the brethren, in fact, would not have been any nearer to the Saint if on the pretext of resembling him they had indulged in extravagances which would have had nothing in common with the transports of their master. But we can imagine what Francis must have suffered. During those Chapters which brought thousands of monks together at the Portiuncula he must have looked sadly at these invaders of his dreams, these brethren who were his conquerors rather than his disciples. The marriage of the great man and humanity is always illusory.

And so before this crowd, Francis must have been conscious of his solitude and of the obstacle against which his power had broken. He had desired to love all men, and in his simplicity he believed he had succeeded when he had brought himself to love the robbers on the highways. But this was not the most difficult part of the business. Not only

does the reprobation in which such men live sometimes make them susceptible, in spite of apparent callousness, to the generosity of a heart that goes out to them, but the very excess of evil into which they have fallen gives hope that they may be capable of a like excess in well-doing. It is the man fast set in mediocrity, who feels that he is reasonable enough to resist genius, virtuous enough to resist sanctity, who is the impregnable fortress, the soul that cannot be fired. The effort of love fails more surely with the average man than with the criminal.

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Yet Francis struggled. There is no doubt that in addition to his many qualities, he had those proper to a chief. It may be asserted that he could even inspire fear. In the records that have come down to us, we note his frown now and again, and his flashes of pride are the more charming because they disappear at once in deep humility. He could make examples if necessary. When he learned that his monks were settled

in a house of their own at Bologna, he ordered them to leave it at once, and made no exception for those who were ill or infirm. Returning to the Portiuncula on one occasion after an absence, he found a house there that had been built in his absence, as he supposed by the monks. In a moment he was on the roof, and soon tiles and laths began to hurtle through the air. The men-at-arms in the service of the town had to come and assure him the house did not belong to the monks but to the commune. But if Francis had all the ardent qualities of a chief, he had none of the more stolid virtues: he lacked the interest, the ambition, the pride that attach men to their enterprises. He had more of enthusiasm than of will-power. When ordinary men come in contact with one of such exceptional sensibility they have a very simple means of securing their triumph; they show him their ugliness; it so disgusts him that he leaves the field to his adversaries. It was all too easy to wound Francis, and when he was

wounded he was no longer strong. Nevertheless, he strove courageously, feeling himself accountable to God for the Order he had founded in the hope of creating something of the divine spirit in men, the Order he commended to Christ so sweetly in the words: "It is Thy little plant." When the time came to draw up the only Rule the Church had officially sanctioned, that of 1223, which practically embodied the defeat of Francis, he made a strenuous effort to maintain those principles without which he felt the Order had no reason to exist. He tried in vain to insert a clause permitting brethren to quit the Order and practise its rule in all its rigour, should those in authority fail to insist on its perfect observance. He did not even succeed in getting the framers of this new text to repeat the Gospel words which had decided his vocation and had guided him like stars. When he discussed the point with Ugolino, the Cardinal assured him that nothing would be easier than to find a text which would satisfy them

both. Thereupon he wrote certain confused phrases in which Francis to his consternation could find no trace of the simple, luminous Rule he wished to offer to the mass of the brethren. Nothing could have distressed him more than all these explanations and commentaries on points which seemed to him to need none. All his audacity had consisted in taking certain words of the Gospel literally and thus recovering their spirit. The supreme recommendation he made to the brethren in his will is a cry of despair. He enjoined them to observe the prescriptions of the Rule in all simplicity: *simpliciter et sine glosa*

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In the end he submitted. He submitted because he knew himself to be the weaker in the struggle, because he had a horror of scandal, and because, though his clear vision of the essential urged him to resist, his natural gentleness led him back to docility. He submitted because since he no longer commanded he would not argue, and here again he showed the

soul of a chief. Even at the dreadful moment when he had to resign the direction of the Order, he preserved the perfect grace of the man of the world, and pleaded his bad health. It is true that this was lamentable. But he has not left us in doubt that had the brethren been more docile, he would never have ceased to govern them. The testimony of Tommaso da Celano is the more decisive in this respect because he wrote one of those official biographies which are more concerned to arrange things skilfully than to show them in their crudity. Here are the words of Saint Francis recorded by him : " I love all the brethren as much as I can, but I should love them still more if they would follow my traces, and I should not make myself a stranger to them." He further declares in words recorded in the *Speculum Perfectionis* that as long as the brethren were obedient and few in numbers he was able to govern the Order in spite of his infirmities. But when, as their numbers increased they left the right road for the easy way

that leads to perdition, seeing that neither his words nor his example were of avail he handed over his authority to others. "But if" he adds with a pathos in which there is still a glimmer of hope "they would yet walk in my path, I would not wish them to have another minister than myself for their consolation and well-being, until my death." And he repeats that obedient monks give so little trouble to their superiors that even a sick man can easily govern them. Yet note with what perfect good sense and chaste respect for his own character Francis chooses rather to acknowledge himself worsted than have recourse to means contrary to his own nature. Bad advice however was not lacking. Certain monks denounced the laxity of their brothers. "Why," they asked him "dost thou not take severe measures?" Had he been less clear-sighted and less pure-minded, Francis might have looked upon those who spoke thus as valuable auxiliaries. But in the specious murmurs that reached him the Saint recognised

the supreme temptation, to be resisted at all costs. That simple soul discerned by an infallible instinct the limit beyond which success would have no value, since it could be bought only by being false to oneself. We marvel that he should never have overpassed the almost invisible line which many more powerful spirits have transcended almost unconsciously. "My office," he declared, "is purely spiritual. It is to overcome vice, to correct and amend by spiritual means. But if I cannot do this by preaching, by warning and example, I will not be an executioner to punish and scourge like the powers of the world." We may form an idea of what he suffered from the words that escaped him during an attack of fever, when he was perhaps delirious, though his delirium only wrung a more heart-felt cry from him: "Who are those cruel ones who have taken my Order and my brethren out of my hands? If I only have strength to attend the next Chapter I will show them my will." During the drama in which the fate of

his work was decided Francis resisted sometimes like an Apostle who was misunderstood, sometimes like a chief braved by his subjects. In the end, only like a bird ensnared and strangled.

VI

The Third Phase

WE have come to the last phase. Francis had been defeated by men, but they had not changed him; he remained himself, and that was his victory. If the joy of conquering them had been denied him, he had at least the consolation of finding himself again. To measure the extent of this compensation we may recall the end of the hapless Savonarola, largely absorbed in politics, and dying in an equivocal torture that he could not even call martyrdom; or we may think of Jacopore da Todi, who also had proclaimed himself one of the knights of love, growling like some wild beast in the cage where Pope Boniface kept him prisoner. Very different was the case of Francis. What he had been before men knew him, all aflame with love and joy, that he found himself again after the effort he had made on their behalf, full of a fervour perhaps a little less naïve

but infinitely deeper. For a great man of his kind nothing is so important as this fidelity to himself; success is less vital than self-fulfilment. It is thus he enters the life of humanity like an element that can never be taken from it, and acts upon it as a sort of eternal obsession. It was not possible or even conceivable that the Saint should overcome the dark instincts of the human soul that warred against his radiant nature. But egotism, ugliness, rapacity and avarice will be for ever abashed before the shining phantom of Francis of Assisi.

When he left the others, Francis exercised the inalienable right of every superior being to return to the fountain head of his own existence, but he did not cease to live for their advantage; they saw him the more clearly when he stood apart from them. Unable to exercise the authority of a chief, he regained the majesty of an example. Ending his life thus by disengaging himself from all that had wounded and disappointed him, to return to what could not wound or

disappoint, Francis traced ingenuously the supreme line by which the most beautiful lives conclude. He was unconscious of this himself; the movement of his soul was simple as the melody of a flute, but it must be our part to discern beneath the song the rich subdued accompaniment which gives it its full meaning. The superior being must needs have known conflict among men, but indispensable as this ordeal is, it is no less necessary that he should emerge from it at last. Every great soul has known bitterness, but no truly great soul has continued in it. All noble lives begin and end with their Gods. When to describe this supreme step of a soul returning to the essential we say that one who acts thus has come back to himself, the expression should be clearly understood; it must not imply the slightest taint of egotism. For every man of genius to come back to himself means to return to those worlds where he forgets himself. But we know that to Francis these great things had a meaning at once fuller and

simpler. To him, to come back to himself was to find God again. Above and beyond the sorrows that had wounded him lay this bliss into which he plunged. During his period of probation he had imposed upon himself the duty of preaching, though he would have preferred prayer, for preaching, as he says with his strange poetry, "covers the feet of the spirit with dust." In the end he felt himself free to give himself up to contemplation and ecstasy. Here he enters a zone where he escapes from us and where all he felt is revealed to us only by the stigmata.

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I deeply regret not having gone up Mount Alverna. An accident prevented me from doing so. Very often I looked at it from afar during my sojourn in the Casentino. On the slopes where I was walking the villages lay baking in the sun like earthen pots. When I mounted higher I found the hermitages of the Camaldoli nestling among rocks and trees. As soon as I had reached a commanding

site I saw the lonely peak of Alverna. It seems to be making an effort to tear itself loose from its surroundings and thrust itself into Heaven, and one might fancy that in coming to seek God here Francis fulfilled the aspiration of the mountain. Alverna had been given him by a gentleman of Chiusi, Count Roland, that he might always have a place for retirement. It was his habit to go there with a few of the brethren, and even these were not allowed to accompany him to the end of his ascent, to the retreat where only Brother Leo might visit him. Many a time had Francis made those slow ascents on the flank of the Umbrian mountains, in which as one gradually leaves the noise of the villages behind, one hears the song, sung by the lines of the mountains more clearly. But never before had he so deliberately quitted the world of men, never had he lifted up his soul to God more eagerly. And then God visited him. The Saint was praying, at that uncertain hour of dawn which seems an

interlude between the worlds of night and of day. He saw suspended in the sky above him like a hawk over a lark, a six-winged seraph bearing upon him the image of the Crucified One. When the normal world with its slopes, its horizons and its distant forests began once more to take shape around him, Francis perceived that the vision had left its traces, and that he bore on his body the wounds of Christ. God forbid that I should here begin a discussion as to the reality of the stigmata, either to declare, as was the fashion of yesterday, that the thing is impossible, or after the manner of to-day, to affirm that nothing is more common in certain diseases. I will only say that to him who looks upon things from within, the miracle is so satisfying as to have been almost necessary. We must not forget that when we think we are describing the life of the Saint, we perceive but a half of it, that is to say his relations with men. All the loftier part of it, that of his relations with God, escapes us. But jealously as Francis

guarded the secret of these, we divine that it was here his soul poured itself out most freely and found most help. The grief and bitterness he had felt in striving for the salvation of his Order he may no doubt have compared humbly and timidly, in his passionate dialogues with his Saviour, to the sufferings of that Saviour Himself. The stigmata were the divine reply; they were to prove to Francis that it was not only in a limited degree but in the plenitude of like anguish that he had re-enacted the Passion. These wounds which the Saint bore on his body henceforth were to him evidences of a great mystery of love. He hid them from men; they did not concern them.

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After receiving the stigmata, Francis came down from Alverna, or rather, he seemed to come down. But the ass he rode was carrying one no longer present in this world. He abandoned his body to the illnesses that ravaged it. All such things were happening beneath him. He passed absently through the crowds

that had gathered on his way; miracles even seemed to emanate from him without his volition. As a fact he was seeking a place for his death, which was but to make manifest a separation that had already taken place. Sometimes this man who was still young, since he was barely more than forty, seemed to revive, and made vast chimerical plans; he spoke of returning to his earlier practices, of tending lepers, of performing prodigious feats under the banner of Christ. But this idea of beginning again is a sign that the end is near.

Yet now when he had detached himself from men they clung to him more passionately than ever. Misunderstood and triumphant he went about in the country. Crowds hung on to his fleeting soul. All the towns coveted him as a treasure, counting on the miracles his remains would work. At last he was brought back to Assisi and lodged in the Bishop's house. "The town rejoiced," says Tommaso da Celano with ingenuous crudity; "the people hoped that the

Saint would die shortly, and this was the cause of their jubilation." As to him, he was perishing of his various ills. The crowning misery was loss of sight. In the darkness that now closed over him he would sing, and when strength failed him he would make Brother Leo and Brother Angelo sing. Human pettiness still prowling round him, suggested by the voice of Brother Elias that the people would perhaps be shocked to find him accepting death so gaily. But Francis was no longer susceptible to such remonstrances, and felt that at the moment of leaving this world he might be allowed to be himself. Meanwhile he considered that he had only been born carnally at Assisi, and that it was at the Portiuncula that he had received the life of the spirit. It was there that the decisive words of the Gospel had come to him as an order, that he had assembled his followers, and had finally resigned his leadership. A sense of fitness worthy of the artist in him made him desire to die there, and there he was carried. It was in the last

days of September, at that season of the year when the soul of the Umbrian country seems to manifest itself. Everything has been cut and gathered. A prodigal and useless splendour gilds the idleness of nature. Great fires of grass are lighted everywhere in the fields, and the smoke, circling in the quiet air, adds lines still softer to those of the landscape. Francis spent his last days at the Portiuncula. His death was so simple that we must beware of overloading it with useless details ; it is enough to record the essential traits. He spent himself in benediction, like a tree lavishing its last sap in flowers. He desired to bless all the brothers in the present and in the future. But even in these effusions he retained that justice and delicacy which made it impossible for him to enfold all mankind in an equal and indifferent love, undiscerning of the best. He was too generous not to forgive the wounds he had received, but he remembered more especially those who had best supported him, and there is, to my mind, something peculiarly

endearing in his affection for certain beings above all others, even to the end. He was perturbed by anxiety for Saint Clare and her nuns, who were full of grief at the thought that they had not seen him again. He also remembered his Roman friend, the Signora di Settesoli; he dictated a letter begging her to come to him and bring him the shroud for his burial, and in the last moments of his life this Saint who had renounced everything showed his charming freedom of spirit and disregard for affected austerity by asking for some little almond cakes which he had eaten in her house in Rome. The letter was hardly finished when there was a knock at the door. It was Giacomina who had come of her own accord, bringing with her the things Francis wished for, and others he would not have asked—candles and incense to illuminate and perfume his new glory.

Finally Francis desired to bless Brother Bernard. In the supreme review of the companions of his life it was natural that his thoughts should turn to his first

disciple, to whom none had set an example, but who himself had been an example to all. Excellent and modest Brother Bernard! We know scarcely anything of him; he disappears in the radiance of the Saint like those planets so near the sun that they are lost in its glory. However, Brother Elias, the worldly-minded, placed himself under the hand outstretched in benediction, eager to receive investiture. Francis, though he could not see, perceived the fraud, and asked again for Bernard, who hastened to throw himself at his master's feet. Then, according to a tradition very pleasing to me, the dying Saint blessed them both, but laid his left hand on the head of Elias and his right on that of Bernard. What a picture we have here! On the one hand, lost in love and sorrow, he who had initiated the Order, leaving all to follow Francis; on the other, the man of schemes and ambitions, who was to bring that Order back into the world; between them Francis, blessing the two, but deceived in neither.

The Saint was wearing away his last hours. He spoke gently to Death, as if to encourage its approach; he asked to be laid naked on the ground, to show that he was faithful to Poverty to the end; thus by his last acts he testified that he had always been the same and that in the human sense of the word he had had no history. He asked to hear the Gospel for Holy Thursday, then desired the brothers to sing the poem he had written, the *Hymn of Created Things*, and here again we must admire the artless freedom of the Saint in thus mingling with the sacred texts the little hymn he had composed, the bird-like song in which he thanked God for the beauty of the world. Finally he himself sang once more. It must have been a strange moment when that dying voice rose in a supreme effort of joy as if to open the way for the soul to follow. It pronounced the words of a Psalm of David, suppliant and pathetic, but when we consider the state of Francis at the moment, we shall think the choice of the words less important than the fact

that he sang; it had always been his manner of speaking to God.

It was Saturday, the third of October; the afternoon was drawing to an end. Francis spoke and moved no more. The brothers approached as they had done before, hoping no doubt that a movement or a murmur would show that their master was still with them; but this time they saw that they were alone.

He died as twilight was falling, at the gentlest moment of those days which are the sweetest of the year. Nothing human remained to be said, but all was not yet over. There was a tremor and a rustling in the air: all the larks of the region were fluttering above the place where lay one who had not loved man only.

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The Minor Brothers gathered round the corpse weeping. Certain though they were that the Saint had entered into eternal glory, they did well to weep, for the Master who had sought to lead them to great heights had never

attempted to vex the feelings natural to the heart of man. But their sorrow was not all equal. There was first the boundless desolation of Giacomina and the best of the brothers, and that of Saint Clare in her convent; then the mitigated grief of Brother Elias and no doubt of certain others. Finally, enwrapping all these degrees of pain, flamed a circle of joy. The whole of Assisi was jubilant, sure now of possessing the body of its Saint.

PART TWO

I

Love

We know something of the life of Saint Francis. It is now time to get an idea of his person. Before we begin, let us remember that men like him are greater, not less than their legend. All the embellishments added to them do not compensate for the insufficiency of the portraits that have come down to us. It could not be otherwise. How can the ordinary man conceive what is so far beyond him? In vain does he attempt to make up for his incapacity to find the pure touch, the suave line in which a marvellous nature inscribed and defined itself, by heaping on crude illuminations. All unique beings take their secret away with them. What we call their fame is merely their shadow. If it could be given us to walk in the country by the side of Francis and to see him turn his ineffable smile upon us we should feel how far short everything we

have heard of him falls of the truth. And yet he was not physically impressive. He was short, of almost feminine delicacy, with small hands and feet, a small round head, brown hair, a scanty beard and fine skin. In the oldest portraits of him he has immense eyes, but we know not if they were really abnormally large, or if this was an exaggeration due to the methods of an art still Byzantine. But his insignificant appearance was in fact appropriate to him. Had he been handsome the care of the body might have proved a snare to him. Had he been physically strong and robust his moral force might have suffered. It was essential that this should have no visible foundation. Like a fisherman who plants his foot on some slight bark to throw his net, Francis cast his all-embracing charm over men from the base of his frail physique.

His moral person, the antithesis of his physical person, illumines and dazzles us, but when we come to examine it closely, it is not easy to characterise it.

St. Francis in ecstasy

In general it may be said that we know men by their hardest or most impure traits. But how are we to take hold of this volatile nature? Francis had none of the defects, caprices and densities of the individual and can be defined only by this absence of personal peculiarities. It might well be said of him that he was not "a character." The real "characters" were the persons who surrounded him and whom he irradiated: Pope Innocent, scrupulous in the duties of his office; the Emperor Otho, passing on the road with his knights; the arrogant Brother Elias, the distrustful Brother Rufino, Brother Leo, the transparent soul. Francis is not to be fixed like these. After he has charmed us by his grace, his tenderness, his subtlety, his kindliness, all these shades of his soul are merged in his simplicity, as all the colours of the prism are hidden in whiteness. How are we to define this ego without frontiers, this force impregnable in face of material ambitions and desires? When Francis says: my sister Water, and my brother

Fire, he does not express merely his admiration for fire and water but his real affinity to them, for it is true that like water he had no colour and like fire he had no lines. He was not primarily a man, but an apparition of Love.

Before showing in what manner he loved we must first show at what price this development of his nature had been achieved: Francis never *thought*. Not that he was the simpleton and idiot that he declared himself to be. On the contrary. We must not forget that during the brief period of his worldly life he was one of the most brilliant young men of Assisi, and that when he deigned to take part in his father's business he could charm and beguile a customer better even than Bernardone himself. He was quick in retort, not easily disconcerted. When insisting on his simplicity we must not forget what Tommaso da Celano tells us: that it was the gift, not of nature but of grace. And indeed, no man who is not something of a genius can so act upon other men as he did.

If he had been as ingenuous as Brother Leo he would have remained a mirror of God unknown to all mankind, like those hidden tarns on mountain heights that drink in the azure of the sky. The crucial fact is that he never ventured into the domain of intellectual speculation. He was not indeed capable of advancing very far therein, but he might have taken a few steps here, like many others. His admirable knowledge of his own qualities and aims withheld him and thus his intellectual nullity assured his plenitude in the things of the heart. A single drop of logic falling into the magic of his love would have troubled its artless splendour. Francis did not think; this means that he abandoned nothing. He knew living creatures and even what we call things only by his far-reaching sense of kinship with them. His was a heart that knew no trammels, and thus he was able to develop within the Church more freely than any other saint. Had he added a single idea to his love of animals, had he sought to carry what he had

begun in the stage of emotion into the stage of reason everything would have been spoilt: he would have become a heretic. But he made no such attempt. To him the one thing needful was to love unstintingly. In any definition of his love we must be careful not to describe this great ardour by any word of a philosophical cast. To associate Francis with any speculative doctrine shows that his true essence and his true greatness have been misconceived. Not that there is any need to spurn either one or the other of the supreme human faculties in this connection. We must only realise that man has his different houses like the Sun; it is alike admirable that in its royal activity the Spirit should be free to forget Love, and that the Heart should be free to forget Thought. Thus we may explain the influence of Francis upon us; there is a whole section of us to which he says nothing; but where he touches us, there is no one who moves us more profoundly. He has often been compared to Christ, and Bartolomeo da Pisa

has formulated this comparison. But the important point here is to see how he differs from his prototype; in the Gospels, Christ appears to us as the Creator of the world; among His recorded sayings some are terrible and mysterious. He threatens and promises. On the other hand it is the function of Francis to manifest himself in a universe for which he is not responsible, in a religion already established, in a house he illuminates but has not built. Hence we may say without irreverence that he gives us more of joy and light than Christ Himself, because he is able to brush aside all those obscure problems he could not have resolved. He does not satisfy us, but for a moment he annuls one part of us, that argumentative part which is the enemy of happiness. He is the festival of our holiday, the sun of our Sabbath. If we consider the case of animals, for instance: Jesus does not seem to have taken them much into account; it is only in the apocryphal Gospels that the ox and the ass witnessed His nativity, and that He moulded those

clay birds which came to life in His divine hands, and took flight when half completed. But the whole trend of the Gospels would have been modified had Christ shown more interest in animals. Francis, on the other hand, loved them with impunity, because he added nothing to love. Thus he was able to open a door in what had hitherto been a blind wall of the Catholic Cathedral, where under a window of painted glass which seems resplendent with all the flowers of the field, the whole animal creation might enter into religion, without prejudice to doctrine.

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Modern man, who thinks he possesses all things, because he bandies the words of all the things he has not, believes himself to be a great lover of Nature. It is true that the Romantics turned it to good account. But they seem to have sought in it a refuge from other men mainly in order to expatiate in it themselves. Jean Jacques, their exemplar, was certainly the one among them whose sensations were

purest and most profound; but they mask depths of disquietude and bitterness. When he finds asylum in Nature, he seems to wallow in a kind of impure innocence. When he embraces trees and worships flowers, he cheats an avidity that has been baulked of satisfactions elsewhere, and the joys he thus tastes have something of the delights of impotence. The case of Chateaubriand is different; he grew up in the fields. An aristocrat coupled with a great poet, he created domains in all the countries he visited; seizing land and sky in a glance, he made fiefs for himself in the clouds. Lamartine, less travelled, is more rustic, and the verses in which he speaks of the country have the accent of truth and sincerity. Hugo on the other hand was a townsman. Nature had primarily the great advantage of affording him space for his vast verbal manœuvres. He describes earth, sea and sky in pictures without a gleam of colour, in which he produces immense effects merely by incessant contrasts of light and shade.

But powerful as these descriptions are, the detail lacks distinction. The poet never bends over beast or plant to give it a more delicate attention. He can say of course that he loves them all. Why not? He is a lord of words. But in his most eloquent poems the rhetoric of love is spread over a solid groundwork of indifference. To modern men Nature simply offers a pretext for the display of their own individuality. We see how little real understanding of it they have when we note their lack of sympathy with animals, and thus measure the difference between their words and their feelings. If there were any solid foundation to all our declarations of kindness, this kindness would not be shed on mankind alone; it would go down deeper, to the obscure companions of our adventure. Even the ineptitudes of materialists, were those who profess them really imbued with them, should at least inspire some sympathy with every living thing. But there is no evidence of this. The rationalist of the

little country town, after declaring that there is no essential difference between himself and animals, proceeds to ill-treat or massacre his relations. Thus, devastating his own abode, man will soon live in a solitude where he will no longer be able to understand himself, because he will have no attachments to anything. Just as it is possible that we are preparing the way for a being superior to ourselves, so too we should be sensible that we are the culmination of the animal world, and that this is instinct with confused sentiments which find expression and consciousness in us. It is absurd to say that man is descended from animals; but it is true and beautiful to say that he ascends from them. Even pity is not invented but merely proclaimed by him. Its obscure genesis lies hidden somewhere below us. All ancient peoples, nearer than we are to many of the secrets of Nature, knew that the lion is capable of certain confused efforts of generosity, and that the elephant shows clumsy evidences of sagacity. The stag

halting at dawn at the edge of a wood where his breath mingles with the morning mist suggests a dream of peace which will steal into the soul of a lonely spectator. The integrity of modest labour begins in the furrow traced by the ox. The hymns of poets spring from the song of birds. Even the insect world, strange and occult though it be, is linked to us by all the butterflies which come to us from it on a summer morning, like messengers escaping from an invested city.

Into this Nature Francis entered so easily and so profoundly that there has been no such instance of familiarity in the Western world. He threw himself into it the more eagerly because he possessed nothing but the treasures it offered him. He did not come to it to lament or to complain, or to avenge his rejection elsewhere. He was interested in everything that moves and shines and quivers. Everything was his, because he forgot himself. Nor did he hamper himself with knowledge. He put nothing between himself and created things. He

became the comrade of all that he loved, walking through the Umbrian country with the august simplicity of the ancient Adam walking in Eden, in the undimmed splendour of the first morning. All the poets of his age had a certain erudition which they displayed upon occasion. Dante thought that the stars influence the destinies of men and he mingled the idea of this influence with the light he received from them. Francis, when he saw them shining in the evening sky, got closer to them, and tamed them better by telling them simply that they are bright and lovely. He was familiar with all things, and marvelled at each one. Catholic historians, embarrassed by these outpourings of love on the humblest objects, have explained that he loved them merely as symbols of Christian verities. No doubt Francis was pleased to give titles of nobility to things that charmed him. Whenever we love fervently, we are never weary of finding reasons to justify our love, though it is not determined by these. To Francis,

it was a delightful accident to be able to think of the Founder of the Church before a rock, or to recall the Saviour of the World at the sight of a lamb. But if these symbols heightened his sympathy or his tenderness they did not cause it. He would have loved the rock for its age-long patience and for the sure support it offers to the hand. He would have loved the lamb simply for its weakness, for its gentle imbecility, its shrill voice, its warm fleece, its branching feet. If it always grieved him to see a lamp put out, it was, no doubt, because of the text of S. Matthew which bids us spare the broken reed and the smoking flax; but primarily, because of an instinctive sympathy with a flickering flame in its effort to live. His boundless benignity was interested in all that lives. When wood was being cut in the forest, he always insisted that care should be taken to allow of new shoots. In the winter he caused wine and honey to be put near the hives to feed the bees; he was so kindly disposed towards them that he

forgot to be logical, and he, who had praised the birds for their improvidence, praised them for their foresight. He was only rigorous to himself and this continued until the day when an ingenious monk, distinguishing between him and his body, represented the latter as a good servant that he treated very harshly. "It is true," said Francis, seized with compunction, and quite ready to show some consideration for his body as soon as this could no longer be entirely confounded with himself. It would be foolish then to imagine the Saint walking through the Umbrian country in quest of edifying analogies and pious comparisons, and waiting to recall some sacred text before allowing himself to cherish the things his eyes offered to his heart. He knew once for all that all he saw was a gift from his Creator. He did not need to think of Him lest he should forget Him. But if he loved all things in God, we must understand that he did not lose hold of them to confound them in their Maker. He loved each one of them

distinctively, and if we can imagine Christ and Francis walking together in the suave simplicity of Paradise it is easy to picture the Saint leaving the Saviour for a moment to admire a flower by the roadside, or a bird on a bush and showing them presently to his Master. There was no creature that his sympathy did not follow to its hidden home. The grasshopper whose tinkling song resounds by day in a dusty tree, the cricket that distils its moist and pearly vibration at night in the crack of a wall, and even those nameless insects that summer scatters on the verge of shining meadows like the crumbs of a feast—yes, truly, he loved them all.

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He loved all things, but a trait in his nature especially endearing prevented him from enfolding all things in an undiscriminating love. Comparisons have often been drawn between Francis' *Hymn of Created Things* and the Psalm in which David invites all creatures, in an imperious and almost military strain,

to praise the Eternal. I should rather be inclined to stress the difference between the two hymns. Nothing could be less akin to the grandiose monotony of the Hebrew prophet than the delicate, precise and caressing affection of the Saint of Assisi for every being and every thing. The Psalmist includes in his list all that appealed to his mind. Francis includes in his all that has charmed his heart. Throughout the vast tapestry woven by his love, we note the golden thread of his preferences. It is true that Francis desired to love all things, but as a fact his artist-taste was so acute that almost unconsciously it limited or at least directed his preferences in such manner that he only distinguished the most magnificent things and the most agreeable creatures. Among animals there were even some for which he felt a special aversion. He could not endure flies, and if we think of the dirty black froth with which they defile the walls of rural dwellings we are not surprised at the repugnance they excited in this lover of

light and cleanliness. He compared them to small coin, and to him, no condemnation could have been greater. When I evoke the Saint among his pets, surrounded by sheep, kids and lambs, with the grasshopper of the Portiuncula near his pillow, the little rabbit of Greccio and the leveret of Lake Trasimenus nestling in either sleeve, while at his feet the bronze tench with orange fins of Lake Rieti turned slowly in the water, I am reminded of those superior beings whom the ancient Kings of Persia chose as their life companions, and who were therefore known as the King's Friends. But to these privileged creatures we must add the most charming of all: birds.

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Happy birds, dainty ornaments of the world! When we see how they beautify our days the wonder is not that Francis so loved them, but that the ordinary mortal is not more alive to their grace. On the heights of life they are like those airy vapours, those iridescent drops which detach themselves from the

St. Francis receives the stigmata

crest of a great wave. They are the supreme gift bestowed by God on his creation. All other creatures toil and suffer with us, prisoners in the same world; they alone are not the slaves of our galley; they alone seem to have been merely lent to earth, where they appear as strangers and visitors. They surround the world of suffering with joy, the world of work with play, the world of noise with song; our servitude with a perpetual deliverance. To roof or tree they lend a presence fleeting as that of happiness. In gardens, on the bough, on the verges of life, at once playful, tender and a trifle mocking they show such turns of the head, such exquisite poses, that the most enchanting attitudes of children and women cannot be compared with theirs. Of all the creatures subject to man they are the only ones he can envy for their wings and their song. But indeed, they seem hardly to belong to the animal world; where but among them is life so radiant, so immaterial? they are souls but thinly veiled. Not only our gentlest sentiments

but our proudest qualities seem personified in these impatient creatures; there is nothing in the world so brave as a wren. Birds represent all that attracts the soul or the heart. They are at once free and faithful. Some of them live close to our homes and are like morsels of the house itself scattered in the garden. They live in a small canton, to them vast and varied as a world. Others, borne along by forces we no longer feel, traverse the heavens at heights from which the earth seems tiny. But all of them, swallows, darting at our casements as if to peck out the eyes of our houses, redbreasts, halting like little princes near our thresholds, linnets, bending forward among leaves to question us with their bright eyes, ask our friendship and comradeship. Above all, they are full of curiosity; we might so easily have made their grace and joy the adornment of our lives; it was man, cruel as a mad king, an imbecile tyrant, who repulsed and terrified the winged legions that came to him. How could

he be so senseless? How is it possible for one who sees birds playing in the golden air of a summer morning not to sympathise so far with their rapture as to feel that in firing at them he would be striking at the most attractive part of himself? The nightingale, by day but a little dusky life in the heart of a thicket, at evening sends out to heaven a hymn so mighty and vehement that the tiny creature seems the spokesman of all created things, of all other animals and of ourselves, and we listen in admiration to a song so ardent and imperious that it seems to mount to God more urgently than our own prayers. And there are people who kill all this! Some Jupiter of a provincial town, unworthy of the thunderbolt he wields, annihilates love, massacres joy, shatters tenderness and fantasy; then this smug and self-satisfied exterminator goes home through the sinister silence of a landscape he has made desolate.

Once at least in the Western world this banner of wings found a human standard

to which to cling. How could Francis have failed to love birds? He was closer to them than to men. He was bold like them, he led the same free, impassioned life, in which there was neither languor nor heaviness. As with them, song was his natural speech. Like them, he of all those invited to the great feast was the guest who took least and gave thanks most. Birds are continually intermingled with his life. The day at Bevagna, when a whole winged audience listened to him, was one of the happiest of his existence and he loved to recall it. At Alviano, when the twitter of swallows drowned his voice he begged them with all the familiarity of a friend to be quiet. At Greccio he brought up redbreasts. At Siena someone gave him a pheasant which delighted him. In other places he set free captive doves. When he went up to Alverno to forget mankind, he found all the birds fluttering round him to welcome him. A falcon came to wake him every morning, and when he had spent a very bad night, allowed him

to sleep a little longer. One day when he was alone with Brother Leo in the falling twilight, when the bluish mountain rose in majesty above the fading landscape, a nightingale suddenly began to sing in a neighbouring bush. Francis, enchanted, told Leo to answer the bird every time it paused, singing God's praise in his turn, and when Leo excused himself on the plea of his bad voice, Francis himself sang again and again until he was exhausted. Then he called the nightingale. The little creature came and perched upon his hand. He congratulated his rival on having been victor in their contest, caressed and blessed it, giving it some crumbs of his bread.

But Francis loved larks above all. What creature could he have chosen more akin to himself than this bird, at once sublimest in the skies and humblest in the furrow? How often in Umbria I have seen it hopping along in the dust! The Saint compared the tufted lark to a Minor Brother, whom indeed it resembles with its brown dress and its cowl-like

crest. I remember one day when I followed a field-path in the valley of Assisi. It was in the chilly days of early spring. The wind whistled spitefully between the pale green shoots. A few flowering trees shivered in the landscape. Under a sky heavy with clouds the larks were singing. At first I only heard their unceasing roulades, like the sound of a crystal key turning in a lock of Paradise. Suddenly, I distinguished one bird ; borne up on fluttering wings, it rose in successive efforts against the wind, singing all the time. In the heights where my eyes followed it I saw others following in succession, a string of black dots. As their strength declined they came down, still singing ; when at last there was one whose breath failed, it dropped immediately as if it felt it had no right to stay in the sky when its presence was no longer justified by a hymn. But then at once the earth sent up another to rise quivering and ecstatic in its turn. It was difficult to listen unmoved to the song of these larks, for which enemies on the

ground and in the air lie in wait everywhere, creatures slaughtered in masses by the peasants of their countryside, yet pouring out such pæans of faith and enthusiasm. Amidst snares and perils innumerable their one sentiment seemed to be joy in existence, delight in their happiness. The lark is indeed the bird of Saint Francis.

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It is impossible to consider the nature of Francis without noting that the sentiments which isolate him in the West bring him into communion with the men of the East. He has their benevolence, their easy fraternity with all living things, and their ecstacy. Sometimes on fine mornings, this became so strong in Francis that he would take two pieces of wood, and using one as a viol and the other as a bow would dance to the rhythm of this imaginary music. In like manner a certain cobbler in Bagdad, generally a diligent industrious workman, would become so intoxicated as the time drew near for the roses to bloom that at last,

throwing his work aside, he could do nothing but wander through the bazaar, singing wildly that it was the time of roses. Francis was not only Catholic but Oriental in his absolute contempt for worldly greatness. One day when the Emperor Otho was passing in grand array not far from the shed where the Saint was lodged, Francis, not troubling to move himself, sent one of the brethren to admonish him in the terms addressed by so many Dervishes to Asiatic conquerors, and to warn him that his glory would soon pass. These affinities with Asia are so numerous in Francis that they make themselves felt in a thousand unexpected traits. In the days when he was given to personal adornment during his worldly life, he had strange fancies, as when he caused pieces of costly material to be sewed together with pieces of the coarsest stuffs in one of his garments. This is an essentially Japanese fancy. During his religious life he could not refrain from picking up any scraps of paper with writing upon them, out of

respect for the letters that form the Saviour's name. In China people are enjoined to pick up bits of paper inscribed with characters. When he lifted a worm from the road and laid it on the verge to save it from the tread of a traveller, Francis was unconsciously repeating the gesture of Buddhist monks. Several of the admonitions he addressed to his disciples have the tone and turn of the Sutras, and the promise of Buddha: "One day the very stones shall enter into Nirvâna," is in complete harmony with the Saint's ardent desire for the happiness of all creation. We know that the Japanese have sympathy and curiosity enough with regard to inanimate things to remark and admire certain rocks, and to pick out pebbles that please them by some singularity of form or colour. Francis, on leaving the Alverna, gave especial thanks to the rock by which he had sojourned. True, he was then at the summit of his mystical life, and in the spot where God had showered such signal favours upon him, his tenderness

fell like a shower of gold upon all the witnesses of his happiness. Nevertheless, it is certain that his sensibility made him capable of an interest in objects which other Occidentals never dream of dissociating from the medley in which they confound all objects. He alone among them associated himself truly and easily with the universal life. There is little difference between the Saint of Assisi who in the splendour of morning calls the sun: My Lord Brother, and the Japanese poet who seeing the planet of endless delights rising in the evening sky murmurs in ecstasy: O most venerable goddess Moon!

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Yet there was a difference. The various manifestations of Oriental sensibility are nourished by a store of doctrines unknown to Francis. "Tell me then," said a Persian painter one day to Ibn-Abbas "if I may no longer represent animals, must I give up the practice of my art?" "By no means" replied the Master. "Cut off their heads so that

they may not look alive, and try to make them like flowers." This fanciful treatment of forms finally resolves itself into the play of arabesques, forgetful in their dance of the things they represent. Francis was incapable of such licence. For him the world was not a great dream. Each of the objects that interested him had its distinctive existence in his eyes, and in this he was truly the father of Western art. Francis was not a lunar but a solar spirit, by which I mean that whatever his ecstasy, the joy he felt did not cast him into that world of dreams where the dreamer rejects reality, and transforms all the disgusts it inspires into delights. We shall find no trace in him of that faint touch of ill-humour perceptible in Chinese painting and poetry. We may note traces of grief and suffering in his soul, but never of melancholy, for beneath the most delicate form of melancholy there is always a shade of plaintive egotism and no one has ever perceived or suspected the existence of egotism in Saint Francis. He has the

matinal soul of the man of action. His joyousness was as the fanfare that wakes the soldier at dawn. He harnessed his gaiety to the souls of others to draw them out of the sadness in which they were sunk. He made war upon the world by love. We must remember that in his early youth he had loved the calling of arms, that he had promised himself to become a great Prince, that he had equipped himself for fighting in Apulia. He compared two of the brethren with whom he was well pleased to the Knights of the Round Table. But nothing is so characteristic as a passage in the *Speculum Perfectionis*, where, after speaking with enthusiasm of Charlemagne, Roland and Oliver, he betrays his dislike of those who make themselves important by relating the exploits of these paladins. In his words we divine his admiration for those who act and his contempt for those who narrate. Like all who desire to act, Francis raised no idle questions. He might have told himself had he set about thinking that it was futile to save

two lambs from the slaughter-house since they would be replaced by two others, to release a hare which would doubtless be caught again, to put back into the water a fish which would end in the net of some other fisherman. He did not look at things in this manner. His act was of value less for its results than as example. In a world of violence he inaugurated the world of pity. He accomplished an act, he sowed a seed. One never knows all one is beginning. An incident in the life of Jacopone da Todi has often been quoted. One day he was wandering distractedly about the country, weeping and embracing the trees. When he was asked why he wept: "I weep" he replied, "because love is not loved." Francis was incapable of such a speech. In the first place he did not weep, he acted. Secondly, he would have been the less inclined to admit that love was not loved, because he himself was there, and he hoped to transmit to others the fire that burned within him. No one was ever less inclined to those reveries

to which the adepts of the eternal Gospel were addicted. He sought no refuge. He lived on this earth and desired not to leave it save for Paradise. He took the world as it was, to make it what he desired. He accepted it as material for action. He found his sojourn in it luminous enough, never suspecting that it was he himself who irradiated it. It is touching to think that Francis lived with such conviction in a world where he was such a rare and marvellous exception. The sublime stranger really thought he was at home. This sentiment is explained alike by his qualities and his defects: perhaps he loved the abode of men so much only because it was likewise the home of birds; if he never abandoned himself to the extravagances of love, it was thanks to the honesty of his good sense; but if he never harassed and tormented himself with certain problems, it was also because he was no thinker. In the drama in which he was engaged he accepted the distribution of parts. There was no creature he was not ready

to help. But if one of these showed himself really perverse, Francis himself stopped short before the obstacle thus opposed to him, not because his love had not strength to overcome it, but because he respected the existence of Good and Evil as a mystery he did not presume to explain. He acted thus both with men and beasts. It happened once in a monastery where he was spending the night that a sheep gave birth to a lamb, which was at once devoured by a sow. Francis was indignant, and that merciful soul pronounced a curse upon the guilty one. The sow fell ill and died. It was thrown into the ditch of the monastery, where its body shrivelled and dried till it was like a plank. Another time at Greccio the monks had taken in a pair of redbreasts with their fledglings. One of these, bigger and stronger than the others, fought them and prevented them from eating, even when satisfied itself. "Look at that rascal," said Francis, "he will soon perish miserably." The bird presently drowned itself when drinking

out of the monk's pitcher, and as in the case of the sow, the other beasts, respecting the Saint's malediction, did not touch its flesh.

But the nature of the Saint appears even more evidently in his attitude to the Devil. It is here we see that eager to love as he was, he never allowed love to become sickly. It did not occur to him to pity the fate of the Devil, he left him in his place. It may be imagined how important the Devil seemed to a soul such as his. It is true that the very naïveté of his faith preserved him from a whole order of temptations, those that assail the soul through the intellect. It is only the more learned, the more contemplative saints who experience those evenings of unspeakable emptiness, when everything seems to have forsaken them, and even the teasing and malicious presence of the old Disputant may be regretted as that of a companion. But the soul of Francis was too sensitive not to be assailed by scruples. He hardly dared to humble himself, lest pride should

St. Francis heals one of his Disciples

enter into him by his very sense of this humility. Again, if we think of his lonely life, his vivacious imagination and the dilapidation of his nerves we shall understand that when he thought the Devil was present, he must have been a prey to terrors almost as intense as those that sometimes assail children. But this did not prevent him from facing the enemy. Far from losing his gaiety in his heart-searchings, he rather made this gaiety the central retreat into which the Devil could not penetrate. Having scanned the positions of the enemy with the eye of a great captain, he reduced him to the occupation of the domain proper to him, and condemned him to appear in his real character. As he so magnificently said: "It is the Devil's business to be sad." He added that sadness is the Babylonian malady and it is true that the Devil is the king of cities. The Saint left him his Babylon, but he took away Nature from him, thus winning so great a victory that Catholicism in its amazement has failed to follow it up as

completely as it might have done. Francis substituted for the lonely Christian, always in terror, an observer in ecstasy. At times in one of his mud cabins at night, oppressed by that immense silence which rather irritates than soothes the nerves, he seemed to feel the presence of the Enemy. He heard him moving furtively behind him: he even felt the hideous head resting upon his shoulder. Then no doubt, he would shudder, less in vulgar terror than in horror at the contact with ugliness itself. But when, gasping for breath, he came to the threshold of his hut the nocturnal scene before him belonged not to the Devil but to God. The distant landscape melted in the moonlight. The trees, erect in the soft radiance, were scarcely more material than their shadows on the ground. But it was Francis himself who had reconquered all this Empire. Admiring a flower or a bird, he never feared to fall into a snare of the Evil One, so sure was he that he had banished his enemy from these joys. He had torn

the mantle of roses from the Devil. After him, the Devil was still the Adversary, but no longer the Seducer. Francis kept him a prisoner in the shade, and here, formidable still, but hideous and obscene, he is the enemy unmasked.

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If we would form a true conception of the love felt by Francis we must not describe it by any word denoting special tendencies. Ardent though he was, one hesitates to speak of him as a mystic. Mystics withdraw from this world, and Francis remained in it. Each of them has his own manner of loving, and even in the transports in which they claim to lose themselves we see their ego striving and writhing like the salamander in the flames. Francis was no self-tormenting soul. Not only was he untouched by such mystical extravagance as that of the Russians, who cannot be content to sin without ostentation, but if we compare him to men very close to him in some respects, we shall see him distinguished from them by a kind of

radiant impersonality. Take, for instance that Jacopone da Todi who also left the world with violence, became a Minor Brother, was a poet and desired to live by the heart alone. His abrupt and vehement love, full of indignation and passion, is like those fires of thorns and faggots we kindle on autumn evenings, which sting us with their sparks when we approach them to warm ourselves. That of Francis was like a log of sandal-wood, perfuming the whole house as it burns. In Jacopone's verse there is a mingling of the sublime and the grotesque. In the efforts he makes to surpass himself he goes so far as to say that he would not hesitate, would even rejoice to be damned if his tortures could procure the salvation of others, or were merely the good pleasure of Divine Majesty. Francis is innocent of such contortions. No man ever set less store on himself. But this sentiment was so natural to him that he never dreamt of priding himself on it, and moreover he had a soul too healthy not to desire an ever increasing fullness

of life. He had a horror of Hell as a place of restricted life, and no doubt to him it was an abode rather of ice than of fire. He who so loved to contemplate fire may perhaps have already thought what Thomas Aquinas explained a little later in learned fashion; anxious to deprive the infernal regions of their splendid prestige of fiery furnace, he said there is as much difference between the sullen glow of hell-fire and the flames that dazzle us on earth as between these and their image painted on a wall.

Francis loved, but his transports never led him into extravagance. He was not constrained, like Jean Jacques, to prolong the effusions of his heart by aberrations of the mind. He does not say that robbers are excellent, but only that we must care for them. He despaired of none, but on the other hand, he would answer for none, because he belonged to a religion which admits the existence of the damned, of men, that is to say, whom God Himself leaves to their fate, though we must not dare to say which they are. Francis

loved his fellow-creatures without depending upon them. Even if they abandoned him and leagued themselves against him, he was nevertheless the Hermit of Love. Hence his songs, his gaiety, his joy of the man without encumbrances. Almost anyone could make him suffer deeply. But no mortal could kill his joy.

II

The Child

Having contemplated the soul of Francis in its plenitude we must try to distinguish each of his dominant qualities, bearing in mind however, that it was not by any single one of these, but by the co-operation of all that the acts in which he manifested himself must be explained. Francis was a Child, a Poet, a Prince, and a Saint.

He was a Child, and the assertion is immediately justified by innumerable evidences, such as his love for birds, and his zeal in sweeping out churches, and removing all dust from them. All children like to busy themselves in cleaning the corner where they live, for such is the natural evolution of taste that they are charmed by the laughter of cleanliness before they learn to love the smile of beauty. Even the passion he showed for building churches immediately after his conversion reminds us of the pleasure

children take in constructing. Like them, he felt the need to realise. We know with what conviction they implant their imaginings in the realities about them when they play. Francis was like them in this. Thus at Greccio, not content to celebrate and commemorate the birth of Christ, he determined to reconstruct it. He arranged a manger in the church, laid straw on the ground, brought in an ox and an ass, and when all the *mise-en-scène* was complete, it was by a kind of necessity that a miracle completed the preparations, and that for a moment a naked Child of marvellous beauty was seen sleeping between the two beasts. The preference Francis had for Christmas above all other feasts was also characteristic: the age of the God adored at this season, the joy the festival evokes in church and home make it an occasion that specially delights the souls of children, and awakens the child again in the hearts of grown men. It was not only in little traits that Francis remained linked to that age from which we are all severed; he

retained the naïve grandeur of the childish soul. He was a child in his fashion of living boldly in a world whose laws were unknown to him, in a universe without distance, where there was nothing he could not come to in three steps, whether it were a flower, a star or God. He was a child in the absolute sincerity of his submissions, as by the audacity of his enterprises, and the suddenness with which he attempted to change the characters of man, just as he no doubt had once hoped to raise a mountain or empty a lake with his wooden spade and bucket. He was a child by the ingenuous splendour of an inner life where all the sentiments shone like ultramarine, scarlet and gold, where there might well be moments of black grief, but never any grey tones. He was a child by his irresistible grace, by the instinctive skill with which he won all hearts; by his desire not to keep the joy he felt to himself, but to make everything in the world happy when he was happy. At Christmas he wanted a double ration for all animals,

feasts for the birds, and as he said with his artless grace: the very walls should be rubbed with meat. It was not only the nature of his wish but his expression of it that has a child-like grandeur and simplicity. "If I could speak to the Emperor," he said, "I would ask him to make a decree ordering everyone to throw grain on the roads at Christmas for the birds, and especially for our sisters, the larks." If I could speak to the Emperor! Is there a child that has not dreamt of thus taking possession of the sceptre and the throne, to issue commands dictated by his heart?

Many of us once knew this limpid life, this boundless sympathy, this august credulity. But far from being still capable of them, we can scarcely call up memories of this vanished fairyland. Even in genius it is rare to see some survival of this divine "favour and prettiness." I can think of no other instance but that of Mozart, for in Raphael what we see is rather the pupil than the child. It may be said of Francis that he was the one

soul life never withered, the one child who grew up instead of dying. Instead of developing the qualities that characterise the adult, and buying this development by the casting aside of the earlier faculties, Francis kept hold of these, bringing them to fuller fruition, until in him they took that pure grandeur, those glowing colours we note in mountain flowers. He was less a man than a glorified and magnified child. The fact is difficult to conceive; he outstrips us before he had reached us; he is greater than we without ever having been our equal.

Children, we know, give souls to everything about them; by such largesse they would seem eager to increase their possibilities of affection. This form of sociability is just that of Francis. There was nothing on which he did not confer the honours of real existence. We must remember, of course, that the Middle Ages loved to personify allegories. When the Saint speaks of Lady Poverty he was notably a man of his times. But he gave

to these abstractions a life and a grace lacking in the somewhat pedantic fictions of his age. Among the things of his environment he shows, like a child, an instinctive preference for all that shine and sparkle. Nothing is more characteristic than his delight in the play of flames. Fire was to him so dear a friend that he was full of favour and complaisance for it. One evening when he was sitting near the hearth, as was his custom, his gown began to burn, unnoticed by him. When a brother intervened, Francis checked him, saying: "No, dear brother, do not hurt the Fire." Another time, a burning brand set fire to the hut of reeds in which he lodged on Mount Alverna. His companion exerted himself to quench the flame, but Francis gave no help and merely moved away, carrying the sheepskin he wore to keep out the cold. Standing a little way off, and watching the flames that were gaily devouring his poor dwelling, he regretted having saved the fleece. "I am very stingy," he said, "to have

deprived my brother Fire of it." Such words have their full grace only when we steep them afresh in the artlessness of a soul for whom nothing was beautiful that had not life. The time came when his affection for Fire was put to the test. It was when Francis was suffering more and more from his eyes, and a doctor prescribed as a remedy a cauterisation of the temples, from the eye to the ear. It was decided that the remedy should be tried, and while the irons were heated, Francis, turning to the Fire, spoke thus: "Brother Fire, noble and beautiful among all the creatures of God, I beg thee to show me thy royal courtesy on this occasion. Having always loved thee, and loving thee still, I pray thee, in the name of God who created us both, to temper thine ardour according to what I can endure." Few incidents in the life of the Saint seem to me more touching than this. If he spoke thus, it was not from fear of suffering, but it would seem as if at the moment of submitting to the terrible touch, he shrank from destroying

the charming fiction in which he had delighted and sought to save the grace of his relations with his lordly comrade. Then the operator took the irons, and applied them to the hissing flesh. The monks who were present left the room, unable to bear the sight. But when they came back Francis declared that what he had felt was quite bearable and that he was ready to submit to it again. The doctor marvelled, while the fire, more beautiful and gallant than ever, smiled in its many-coloured robe.

III

The Poet

He was a poet. He would have been an artist if he had allowed himself to follow his bent, and even a voluptuary. His delicacy of feeling began with that of his senses. We know that in his youth he loved dainty food. When he was working at the restoration of churches in the early stages of his religious life, the old priest who provided him with nourishment noted this tendency and did his best to feed him well. But these attentions were intolerable to Francis as soon as he noticed them. He went begging his bread from door to door and mixing up all the scraps that he received; the very sight of this mess sickened him, but he forced himself to swallow it. In certain houses where he was given shelter, if some excellent dish were offered him he always found a civil pretext for refusing it, and even when he shared the humble fare of the

brethren, if any viand surprised him by an agreeable flavour, he sprinkled it with ashes, for said he, with his usual grace, our Sister Ashes is chaste. Such were the austerities Francis practised, when he thought it necessary to subdue the flesh. But even in his life of privation he could not suppress tokens of a certain modest sensuality, innocent symptoms of his natural delicacy of appreciation. Once when he was exhausted with suffering, he confessed that he could fancy some pike. Another time, he wanted a little parsley. And even at the point of death, when he was about to take the step leading him into eternal glory, the gracious creature was not ashamed to remember a certain dainty he had once enjoyed and to ask for it. But here as always we recognise the clarity and decision of Francis, his large manner of treating things: the indulgences he allowed himself were as liberal as the privations he imposed upon himself were absolute. He rigorously denied himself human luxury, but he gave him-

self up to boundless enjoyment of the luxury of God. He who had renounced silks, brocades and all rich stuffs was full of admiration for the suave and innocent prototype of these, the etherial splendour of a flowery meadow. He who had rejected every kind of adornment, thought it no harm to sit every evening straining his eyes in watching the fire as it put on in a single minute costumes more gorgeous than the vainest young man could have invented. No one ever lived in such a continuous festival as the Patriarch of the Poor. After imposing absolute destitution upon the Minor Friars, he directed them to plant among the vegetable plots of their monasteries, flowers, valuable only for their colour and perfume. Thus the faithful Saint Clare always had a garden of roses, lilies and violets near her room, in which there was no furniture but the plank on which she slept. Such was the nature of Francis : no one could have thought less of being an artist, no one could have been one more completely. As soon as the intention governing his

actions left him free to indulge his tastes, he wished to see everything clean and comely; he asked for very white sacramental wafers and sent irons to the monasteries for their confection. Here again we are reminded of Asia. We recall those Japanese Buddhists of the sect Zen who lived with refined austerity in cottages built of scented wood. The nail-heads were designed by famous artists, saucepan and cauldron were the works of an exquisite art that sought to conceal itself in rustic forms. Francis indeed was far from allowing himself such indulgences, but I fancy that when he chose the hermitage where he was to renounce all he was attracted, perhaps unconsciously, by the happy configuration of the spot, and that when he had up a pinch of ash from the hearth to illustrate the nothingness of things, he had a certain unwitting pleasure in the softness and fineness to the touch of this sand of the flames. I do not forget the story of the vase he had modelled, and broke in pieces because the thought of it had

distracted him during his prayers. But this very incident confirms me in my idea; if Francis' thought dwelt on his work, he must have taken more pleasure in fashioning it than he supposed. If there is a Paradise where everything that deserves to be saved will be found again it would be charming to see the object modelled by the Saint and to recognise it as a work of art by its purity of form.

Francis would not allow himself to be an artist, but he allowed himself to be a poet. The poet is less attached to the material world than the artist. He is further from enjoyment and nearer to ecstasy. From his earliest years Francis had loved music. He delighted in it all his life and never thought that he ought to deprive himself of this pleasure. Once when he was at Rieti, ill as usual and suffering much from his eyes, he said to Brother Pacificus, who in his worldly life had been famous as a poet and musician: "Brother, the men of to-day use the cithar and psaltery for profane purposes. Those instruments must be

given back to the service of the Lord. I pray thee, get a cithar and thou shalt make music for me, to win me from the pain of the body to the joy of the soul." The good brother, not perhaps quite free of devout hypocrisy, replied that he would be ashamed to inquire for a cithar, because, said he, "as it is well known that I used to play this instrument in the world, people will think I still indulge this taste." Francis was accustomed to find that there were always good reasons for not doing what he wished. "Good," he said, "we will think no more of it." But in the middle of the following night, when pain was keeping him awake, he suddenly heard in the silence the quivering notes of a cithar rising from the street. Soon the melody increased in volume and became so exquisite that Francis had never heard the like. Sometimes the sound seemed to become distant and then to return again, as if the musician were moving to and fro as he played. The mysterious serenade lasted for over an hour, and the Saint realised that it was

no mortal who had given it. The next morning he said to Brother Pacificus with that benignity in which there was often a touch of innocent malice: "I made a request to thee, Brother, which thou didst not receive very well, but God, who does not leave His friends comfortless, deigned Himself to give me what I desired."

During another sleepless night, when Francis was on Mount Alverna, the angel musician returned, and this time he showed himself. Radiant with a splendour greater than that of the plumage of peacocks, the heavenly being drew his bow once only across his viol. The Saint in ecstasy felt at the point of death. He said afterwards that if the angel had repeated the sound, the unbearable rapture would have torn his soul from his body.

All his life Francis was a poet, singing rather than speaking, a poet who reserved the tongue of Provence as a festival language, solely for the expression of his joys. But if he was a poet he was so

only in essence. He had none of the pettiness, the weaknesses and pretentions often to be found in such natures. Quoting the famous saying of Jacopone da Todi: "I weep because love is not loved," I explained why Francis could never have uttered it. To the reasons already given another may be added: the phrase is in the nature of a witticism, and Francis never indulged in these. He was a poet without happy inventions, or rather his only invention was to say to the brethren: "I bless you as much as I can, and even more than I can." We see by certain indications that he used expressions equal in amenity and vivacity to his sentiments: for instance, insisting on the extent to which the perfect General of the Order should prove himself serviceable and self-sacrificing, he said that such an one should be ready to be plucked like a bird by the brethren. But to these natural gifts the Saint added nothing. How indeed could the man whose first step had been to come out of himself go down again to the level of recognising his own

talent with complacency? His sentiments rose straight from his heart to his lips, without borrowing ingenious expression from his head. This is why his words astonish us, and sometimes almost disconcert us by their artlessness. Those of other great men are as mighty footmarks: we perceive that some kingly beast has passed, but those of Francis are like the starry traces of birds, which scarcely mark the earth. Hence the unique character of the *Hymn of Created Things*, a poem that blossomed above the domain of art, and at once made manifest an ineffable soul. In the treasure-house of universal poetry, filled with the finds and inventions of genius, it gives a pleasure akin to that one might feel in the garden of Aladdin where every blade of grass is an emerald, and the dew itself of diamonds, should one suddenly see the sparkle of a drop of clear water.

IV

The Prince

He was a prince and perhaps here we come to the very heart of his nature: in the worldly period of his life Francis was evidently an aristocrat, as he was less overtly, but even more intimately during his religious life. Of course his main preoccupation then was to practise the precepts of the Gospel, but these precepts, far from obliging him to vex his nature, must have given him many opportunities of gratifying it; some of them indeed breathe the most aristocratic spirit. No common conception of justice would grant to the workers of the eleventh hour the same wage as to those who had toiled all day, draping true Justice in the splendid robes of Favour. Popular opinion would hardly deem Mary's contemplation of higher value than Martha's activity. The axiom that disapproves the casting of pearls before swine is no vulgar sentence. It is evidently more in

harmony with popular opinion to express indignation, as the Apostles did, at the Magdalene's costly offering of perfume. The approval and justification of this largesse was a manifestation of the highest taste. What subtle delicacy in the recommendation to those who have made a long fast not to announce the fact by an exhausted mien, but to wash and perfume themselves, to prevent others from suspecting their self-inflicted privations! This counsel pleased the Saint so much that he inserted it in his Rule. Nothing could have been more agreeable to him than this delicate dissimulation, the very antithesis of hypocrisy, yet not less skilful since it uses no less art to preserve itself from praise than do hypocrites to attract it. Soon after the conversion of Francis, when he was all the more himself because he was as yet alone, Bernardo di Quintavalle, who was attracted by him, but wished to prove him, receiving him one evening offered him an excellent bed. Francis seemed glad to stretch himself out upon it and

pretended to sleep, but when he thought that all the household was at rest he got up, to spend the night in prayer.

It is impossible to come near to the nature of Francis without receiving an impression of extreme distinction, but in the actions of the Saint this refinement is difficult to seize, because it is so often merged in his great simplicity. When he mimes the viol player with two pieces of wood, we think first of a childish game; then we remember those mute concerts in Japan, where the musicians trace fragmentary gestures above their silent instruments, to suggest harmonies subtler than any they could produce. Other acts of the Saint are less ambiguous. One night when he lay awake in his cell he was assailed by a temptation the harder to resist because it attacked both his flesh and his heart. It was regret for never having had a wife and children. He scourged himself, but failed to overcome his trouble. At last, unable to bear it, he went out of his hut, and the little monk who was watching him saw

him in the pale light on which the lamp shot reddish beams, modelling figures of snow; then he said aloud: "Here is thy wife, thy two sons, thy two daughters and thy male and female servants. They are dying of cold, they must be clothed. If thou art not able to provide for them, remain in the service of the Lord." This manner of throwing off the trammels of desire by a kind of derision of the objects of his dream is not the method of a simple mind.

Francis was above all things a knightly soul. Courtesy was a quality with which he was deeply imbued; he prized it so highly that he made it one of the attributes of God. His love of nature, limpid and ingenuous, receives the sole tint that colours it from this sentiment. He was not only the most tender but the most affable of beings; nature was, for him, a society. He approached all living things not only with love but with consideration. He reminds one of those good people who when collecting simples, first salute the plant whose flowers or seeds they are

about to gather, and still more, of those Japanese who carry all the refinements of court life into their relations with flowers and animals. There is the credulity of a child in the Saint's habit of taking all existing things seriously. There is the generosity of a great Saint in the universal extent of his love, but between these two extremes there is the grace of a great Prince in the manner in which he raises a tiny beast or herb from its inferiority to enfold it in a golden fraternity. His affection for things is as delicate as gratitude. He thanks each of them for their adornment of the Universe. He showed no less courtesy in all his relations with the Minor Friars; he made it his rule never to appear before them without a smile on his face, and when he felt incapable of this he preferred not to show himself. It must be remembered that even in his worldly period, when he uttered so many follies, he was never heard to use a coarse word. Had he been perfectly understood, the lives of the brethren, poor as he wished them

to be, would have been far from boorish; there would have been nothing rude about them but the utensils necessary for their subsistance, and as to sentiments they would have lived in their thatched cabins among their earthen vessels with greater delicacy than the inhabitants of palaces. Francis had that quality which many a great man has lacked, but without which there is no completeness: taste. Even his apostolic zeal never made him indiscreet. Once when he was passing with Brother Leo by a castle where all the gentlemen of the neighbourhood had gathered for a great festivity, he seized the opportunity to preach to them. Scarcely had he finished when a noble, he who afterwards gave him Mount Alverna, came to him, saying: "Father, I wish to entrust the care of my soul to thee." "That is good news," replied Francis, "but go first to thy guests and join in their feast, afterwards we will talk together as much as thou wilt."

Catholic as was the love of Francis for all mankind there are several indications

that he had a weakness for knights. In the first place the life they led, worldly though it seemed, was based on vows that gave it a certain affinity with that of the friars. But apart from all such considerations was it not natural that Francis, who so loved the splendour of flowers and fire, the rich livery of birds, should have retained an involuntary indulgence for these gentlefolks, brilliant in their costume as the pheasant once given to him? He was always warning the brethren not to censure those who lived delicately and wore fine clothes. "There are men," he said, "who seem to-day to be children of the Devil, but who will some day be disciples of Christ." He was well aware that the social hierarchy is not to be confused with the real hierarchy, but he allowed no one to anticipate the judgments of God, nor to believe that the overthrow of the first would bring about the reign of the second. He never encouraged denunciations of the well-to-do and powerful. I cannot but think that while he dis-

approved with all his soul of their carnal preoccupations, he appreciated the elegance of their lives. He has the weakness of loving happiness: the festivities of knights and ladies presented a semblance of this, deceptive but not gross. He saw from afar their silken garments, he heard the sounds of laughter, poetry and music, and though he wished to convert those who were deceived by a vain show, the charming spectacle of their vanities never excited his anger. As to all exquisite souls, Good and Evil must have presented themselves to him in the guise of Beauty and Ugliness. He had a horror of vulgarity, and a special abhorrence of calumny; now there is no fault to which the masses are more inclined. Inferiors slander for the pleasure of tale-bearing and to avenge themselves on those to whom they are obliged to show respect. The manner in which Francis taught that veneration should be shewn indiscriminately to all priests in virtue of their office was altogether alien to popular propensity.

The spirit of the populace is that of the *fabliaux*, of Francis that of the romances of chivalry. If, together with his instinctive preference for his knightly contemporaries we would discover a voluntary preference expressive of his nature, we shall find it in his sympathy, not with those who have little but with those who have nothing. Not the man of shop or field, all the more tenacious of his property because of its modesty, but the beggar, the vagabond, the leper, the destitute, for in their poverty Francis saw a kind of inverted grandeur; he recognised them as the representatives of God, or, as he says in his courtly language: the heralds of the Great King. To measure the distance between him and his successors, read the sermons the Franciscan, Saint Bernardino, preached at Siena some two hundred years later. They are marked by a certain trivial benevolence. When he is not indulging in scholastics, the good saint seems to slip into gossip. There is nothing of this sort with Francis. He who had the art of speaking to all

St. Francis raises a woman from the dead

never tried to adapt himself to any of his hearers. He was always the same, whether he addressed peasants or nobles, the Sultan of Egypt or the Pope of Rome. He was indeed the brother of Fire, equally magnificent in the homes of the rich and the poor.

This soul, so full of love, shunned the public. Francis had that instinctive distaste for the crowd often found in natures both proud and refined. At Gaëta, when the people pressed around him on the seashore, he got into a boat to avoid them. He always enjoined his disciples to take their solitude with them when they went among men, and he himself was wont to make his way amidst the throngs that gathered on his road without seeing them. He showed a modesty almost verging on shame concerning the miracles he performed. Once when he returned to Narni where he had cured a demoniac woman, she proclaimed her gratitude in the market place with Italian vehemence. Francis passed her by in icy silence, and only when urged by Brother Elias did

he answer her by a sign of recognition. All the elements of his character are revealed in such an incident. If he refused to hear and distinguish the woman who acclaimed him, it was because the Saint in him despised vainglory, but also because the patrician was shocked by her indiscretion. Francis never doubted his right to safeguard the privacy of his soul. His biographer has told us how conscious he was that it is bad to give oneself up to all, and how he had agreed with the brethren that when he repeated a certain verse it should be a signal to them to dismiss politely any importunate visitor. He often quoted the saying of Isaiah: My secret is my own. He kept most faithfully all that were confided to him, and wrote among his admonitions: Happy is the servant who keeps the secrets of the Lord in his heart. Unlike most of the devout, he was reticent as to the familiarity of his intercourse with God. He gave himself up to ecstasies only when he thought himself alone. In public he prayed soberly and without effusion.

All these traits in a creature who seems so simple reveal the nobility of a soul able to guard its well-springs and to give without profaning itself. Francis would not have been of such value to men, if he had been theirs without reserve.

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Did we need other proofs of his real nature we should find them in the character of the Order at its beginnings. The idea that the poor and humble were those who first flocked to it is a mistaken one; it was with rustics that the saint and his early disciples seem to have had the least pleasant relations, and when a peasant figures in their story, it is often in a disagreeable light. The majority of the chosen companions of the Saint were not men of the people. Bernardo di Quintavalle was one of the richest and the most respected citizens of Assisi. Brother Giles was a man of family, Brother Angelo was a knight of Rieti, Brother Rufino was of noble birth, as were also those two Bolognese students who after hearing Francis preach, became Brothers

Pellegrino and Bernardo. Again, that Brother Leonardo who envied the Saint the ass he was riding one day, was a noble. Brother Pacificus came to Franciscan poverty out of the fame and pleasures of the century. The friend Francis had at Greccio, with whom he arranged the representation of the Nativity, was a man of high lineage. As regards women, the evidences are even more pronounced. The friends of Francis were all noble dames: Clara Sciffii at Assisi, that lady Praxede he knew at Rome, and Giacomina di Settesoli, another Roman lady, whom he desired to see before his death. And indeed, the vows he exacted from his disciples, the breaking down of the barriers of pride, extreme poverty, and boundless humility, were not ideals that appealed to the populace. Those of small means are too near the social abyss not to dread falling into it. They are the more tenacious of their little advantages the slighter these are. Even when one of them becomes a priest, it may be that he is less desirous of leaving the

world than of raising himself in it. It is those who have enjoyed all its privileges who seek liberation in poverty. It is the man who stands at the highest point of the social hierarchy who is ready to lose himself in voluntary nullity. The pleasure the soul feels in such renunciations is in proportion to the change it experiences. Weariness of the social order is a sentiment proper to delicate natures. Thus in India a king about to quit the world sits on his throne, decked with the insignia of sovereignty to receive for the last time the homage of his subjects and even of animals. His elephants, advancing in line, bend their docile knees before him. When the ceremony is over, he takes off his royal trappings, unrolls the turban in which an enormous ruby was set, leaves the palace where he has commanded, and presently on one of the roads of his whilom kingdom, he is nothing but a man making his way to the mountains, destitute and delivered.

Such were the first disciples of Francis.

The nun to whom Saint Clare wrote most frequently and affectionately, enjoining her not to destroy her health by excessive mortifications, was the Blessed Agnes, daughter of the King of Bohemia, sister of the King of Hungary and the potential bride of the Emperor. Saint Elizabeth, Tertiary of the Order and inspired by the purest Franciscan spirit, was the daughter of the King of Hungary and the wife of the Landgrave of Thuringia. Another Elizabeth, also a Tertiary, was the daughter of the King of England, and was Queen of Portugal. Saint Louis, King of France, was another member of the Tertian Order; in its beginnings, the spiritual family of the Saint dazzles us with crowns numerous as its aureoles. If we wish to form an idea of these princesses in their detachment from their age we should contemplate them in Simone Martini's admirable frescoes in the Lower Church at Assisi. Saint Clare appears there, long, pale, almost sullen, a strange great lady of another world. Near her is Saint Elizabeth of Portugal with droop-

ing head and elongated eyes, and hands tender and useless as flowers. Only in Buddhist art shall we find parallels to these. These Saints are sisters of the Bodhisattvas. They have the same regal and supernal purity, the same large aureole delicate as the new moon, richly embroidered round a pallid face, the same bodies without organs, so long, so slender, so detached from earth that they seem to have mounted naturally to heights where their heads rest against the stars.

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Yet Francis of Assisi figures as a popular saint: our mental perversities account for this error. We are determined to know a man who has risen above others only by the influence he has had upon these, without considering that the mediocrity of those who have submitted to it counts for at least as much as the superiority of him who exercises it. We should learn to apprehend a great man at the source of all that flows from him, in his personality itself, and if I may venture to say so, in his solitude. Francis

shines, ardent, pure, celestial, intact, above the great flood of devotion that rises at his feet. The glacier does not recognise itself in the river. It is certainly not his fault if crowds of Capuchins have borrowed his name and if he has become the patron of an Order that haunts kitchens. We are told that he founded a popular religion. Popular religion is a mixture of observances and superstitions, the pursuit of relics of Saint Francis; nothing could be more remote from his intense and delicate Christianity, which consists in living in Christ, in God, at the heart of the rose. To understand him we must confound him less with the times that followed him and set him more clearly in those in which he lived. Above all, we should withdraw him from the historic Order, for he belongs to it by his imitators and not by himself. Above the centuries he did a thing that could neither be forgotten nor continued: he showed the face of Love. But we are so impregnated with the prejudices of our age that when we admire such a man

as Francis we think we honour him best by making him great according to our own pettiness, and associating him with our own mean interests. It is the story of Camille Desmoulins and the *Sans-culotte* Jesus over again. As it is the pitiable malady of modern man to be obsessed by social things, and so absorbed in his alleged political liberties that he loses all sense of real liberty, we are bent on lending such ideas to Francis. But to describe him as democratic and the founder of a democratic Order is the grossest of errors. I have called him an aristocrat, but by this I merely define a nature proud and delicate in its every movement. It was inevitable that the sentiments he evoked in souls should find an echo in the political order. But he had no such intention. His feeling with regard to society, like that of Christ Himself, might be as aptly called respect as indifference or disdain. He wished every man to be at peace with it, that so he might be the freer to seek his real life elsewhere. When we attribute social

intentions to him, we pervert all that is most rare and precious in him, and deprive ourselves of the benefit his advent brought us; instead of profiting by the release he offers us, we make him enter our prison.

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There is yet another domain in which the influence of Francis was very great, but in which again it must be distinguished from his person: a pathetic art issued from him, and ended in a vulgar art; but Saint Francis was not responsible for this. He could not suspect that the simple joys he offered to his heart would result in the destruction of the art of the thirteenth century. What is truly Franciscan among the Italian Primitives is that delicate and attentive sympathy with which each object is observed, the manner in which the smallest things in their pictures shine with the lustre of their humble honour. Everything has been closely examined, not with the cold and microscopic application of which we find examples in so many Little Masters of a later period, but with the

tender curiosity of love. The wayside flower which later painters will think it sufficient to indicate by two or three hasty touches, was carefully reproduced by the Primitive because he believed that it really existed, and for a moment made it the sister of his own life. It was the same with the lizard, clinging so closely to the wall that it seems to be part of it, with the bird so lightly poised upon the branch that it appears ready to take flight, with the pebble shining so clearly on the road that its clean brilliance associates itself with the gaiety of fine weather. There was a Franciscan art as long as the things that claimed the admiration of the artist were more important in his eyes than the picture in which he enshrined their images. But we must not turn to the Florentines to find the mystic and yet chivalrous grace of the Saint in Italian art. They were so much in love with life that their worldly and temporal art could not fail to become a little trivial at times. We must look rather to the works of the Sienese which

seem to have blossomed in an atmosphere above all vulgar reality, works not inaptly associated by the mysterious predestination of rhyme with all that is most gracious in Chinese art. Only the painters of Siena were able to represent the Virgin as Francis must have imagined her. I was never weary of recognising her in the scenes where they represent her in all the churches of the country. Here the Angel of the Annunciation is no handsome lad of the streets, but truly a heavenly page, and his nature seems to manifest itself in his rich apparel. He bends or kneels before her who resembles him, the slim and fragile creature who is about to have laid upon her the most momentous mission ever entrusted to woman. I recall too the Assumptions painted in predellas or on the walls of chapels. The Virgin, robed in white and wrapt in a white and gold mantle, is seated in the midst of a group of angels who lift and support her while she rises heavenwards, her hands folded, at once young, grave and mature, a

marvellous creature in whom experience and purity are combined. Far beneath the ethereal region in which she floats lies the earth, so varied and so delightful that any other than she would feel some regret at leaving it, with its roads, its trees, its farms, and everywhere on its hills towers that seem eager to follow the ascension of the Blessed One. There is no link between the two zones save the Virgin's girdle, which she has dropped to prove the reality of her Assumption to Saint Thomas; it falls in spirals to the Apostle who awaits it below beside the useless tomb, now filled with roses. Saint Francis himself is not so present in the famous frescoes of Assisi and Florence in which Giotto has painted his life as in the little panels, now dispersed, of the altar piece where the Sienese Sassetta treated the same scenes. Giotto shows the mastery and independence of a great painter, who puts forth his powers in the subject he is treating, without any special sympathy with that subject. His frescoes are admirable

records. He is less interested in the significance of his story than in the distribution of his figures, who are important to him by their volume, and who rise like towers on the various planes of the composition. His genius, dramatic and non-mystical, renders the Franciscan legend with much power whenever the spirit of the Saint comes into conflict with that of the age, but it would seem that this spirit escapes him when it is manifested in all its grace and purity. In the great scene where Francis, breaking with his father, casts off his clothing, Giotto seems to be less interested in the young man himself than in the muscles of his ribs, thus foreshadowing the art of the Renaissance which like the antique art from which it sprang, in the end was caught in the snare of the body. When Giotto shows the Saint among the Minorites, he makes us think that they are all equal; but Sassetta makes us feel how unique Francis is. Consider the Assisi fresco representing the meeting of Francis and the beggar: they are

two men of the same kind, associated in a composition where they balance each other. Then look at the same scene as rendered by Sassetta: how great is the contrast between the haggard suppliant and the slender, eager youth, who strips off the mantle he is about to give with such haste that it seems to slip from his shoulders like running water. Again, let us compare the scene treated by both masters in which Francis in the presence of the Sultan proposes to the doctors of the law to undergo the ordeal of fire with them. Giotto's fresco at Santa Croce has a heaviness aggravated, no doubt, by the horrible manner in which it has been repainted, but inherent in the composition. The personages have a sullen air, the very fire seems petrified. How different from Sassetta's panel, where the Saint plunges with charming boldness and impetuosity into the terrible heart of the flames. Of the two masters, the Florentine is vastly the superior in genius; but the Sienese is much nearer to the soul of Saint Francis. When the

Florentine painters represent a miracle, it explodes in the picture as a dramatic climax, and seems to destroy everything around it, whereas in the works of the Sienese, it seems to crown all. Among the scattered fragments of Sassetta's altar-piece there is one which may easily be studied: that at Chantilly representing the marriage of the Saint with Poverty, attended by Humility and Chastity. In this exquisite work, the very landscape is akin to the figures; their sentiments seem to be continued in it: a house in the plain looks like a follower of the three Virtues, clad in white like them; the mountain in the background is, as it were, an obscure companion of the Saint, wearing the brown gown of the Friars.

. . . .

Hence, instead of seeking Francis only in what claims to represent him officially, to know him well we must approach him in those of his qualities which were not continued after him, or were continued only for a brief season. For it is very

true that in the early days of the Order, the most exquisite traits of the aristocratic mind were often so transfigured as to become the most delicate manifestations of the mystical spirit. The following is an instance, taken from the *Fioretti:* "When Saint Louis was going from one pilgrimage to another, he heard such high praise of the sanctity of Brother Giles that he could no longer bear to live without knowing him. He went to Perugia, and knocking at the monastery door, he asked very urgently to see the brother. He was poorly dressed with but few companions and had not given his name. The porter went to tell Giles of the unknown's request, and it was at once revealed to the Friar that the visitor was the King of France. He hastened to the door, and as soon as he and the King were face to face they knelt down and embraced each other without speaking as if they had long been intimate friends. They remained thus for some time without a word, then they rose and the King departed. One of the brethren, having

learnt who the pilgrim was, informed the rest, and all were perturbed at the thought that Giles had not addressed a word to him: 'Brother Giles,' they cried, 'how couldst thou be so churlish as not to open thy lips, when such a king had undertaken a journey to see thee and to hear some good words from thee?' 'Dear brethren,' replied Giles, 'be not troubled, for scarcely had we embraced each other when a divine light revealed to me all he had in his heart, and to him all I had in mine, so that human words would have been a hindrance rather than a help to us, and would rather have divided than drawn us closer. Fear not, the King went away consoled and satisfied.'"

This is a scene which recalls the East in its most subtle productions of the same sort, and indeed wherever we find the true Franciscan spirit we see in it the play of reflections from Asia. Even the vagaries of the eccentric Brother Juniper have their counterpart in the East. One day when he was approaching Rome where a band of devotees awaited him,

he started swinging with some children and when the others came to meet him they found him with his legs in the air at the end of a plank. Nothing could be more akin to those deliberate incongruities by which the Chinese Taoists loved to scandalise the somewhat hypocritical prudery of the disciples of Confucius. Again it is Asia which is suggested by that extraordinary Raymond Lulle, a member of the Third Order, who speaks to God in his poems after the fashion of the Persian mystics. Less simple than Francis he nevertheless reproduces the general design of the Saint's life in broader and more strongly marked lines. Like Francis, he began by tasting all the pleasures of the world, but in his case it was a love adventure that cast him into religion. Like Francis, he remained a poet all his days, but he has left us a series of works. Like Francis, his great ambition was the conversion of the Musulmans, but here again he went further into the matter than his prototype, and won martyrdom at the age of

eighty-two. He had a thousand adventures altogether beyond the range of Francis and possessed learning of which Francis had no inkling. It is said that he made gold in London. Nevertheless he was a true Franciscan, for he put Knowledge at the feet of Love. Dante, Roger Bacon and others were affiliated to the Order, remaining what they were but subordinating it to what Francis represented. It was permissible to be his disciple with all the gifts of talent and all the riches of learning, if only a certain quality of the soul were added to these. Nowadays we have such a restricted idea of man that we cannot conceive of a person distinguished by more than one prominent quality. We imagine simplicity as a kind of absent-minded emptiness or platitude. It is a great mistake. We may have the most multitudinous soul, the most subtle mind, the richest genius, and on this palace of our nature simplicity may come and rest like a dove.

If the Western world had offered a better field to the seed sown by the

Poverello of Assisi, the outcome would not have been merely a popular monasticism, but an Order comparable to certain Buddhist sects, in which princes, men of science, warriors and artists would have become Franciscans at the summit and as it were above themselves, forgetting their world in the ecstasy of the Universe. It is significant that all movement in this direction ceased at the Renaissance. It was indeed the Renaissance that separated the two worlds. When we study the men of this period, and especially the Italians who represent the avidity of the ego so vividly we first marvel at the ardour with which they desired enjoyment and domination, and then are astonished that they were not disgusted with these in the end. Indefatigable combatants in the world where their desires had cast them, they never conceived of another where their greatness would not be measured by their fortunes. They always remained greedy and credulous. The yearning, so natural to Orientals, to strip off power and so to

find personality, a yearning evident in the legend of Cyrus and in the Hindu epics, was thenceforth foreign to the Western soul. All the strength of religion was needed to raise Richelieu above the plane on which he was held down by the exercise of his power. Formerly, and even till recently, a classical education gave those who had received it an opportunity to rise to heights from which they ruled their lives. But now that these two resources are lacking, man has no way of escape. He has become at once the dupe and the slave of his task, and has no pride unauthorised by that task. Thus we see many of our putative superiors puffed up with vanity when in office, and sincerely convinced of their nullity when they are reduced to themselves—an opinion, indeed, in which they do themselves no injustice. The modern man only quits power when he falls from it. He never leaves it from above. He can no longer escape from the social order.

It is the same thing with the love of

Francis for animals. If all this part of the Saint's heritage has not been accepted it is because Western ideas made the thing impossible. Here again there was some show of a continuation in the beginning. We hear of a Franciscan recluse who had made himself so one with nature that when he was motionless, birds perched upon him as on a tree and sang. But this Brother of the Indian ascetics had no imitators. The Western man is the prisoner of his idea of his own importance: it separates him from all living things. Francis seemed for a moment to have annulled these distances. The beasts stepped out of their dens, the feathered tribes approached. But scarcely had he disappeared when the animals retreated and the birds returned to the bosom of the seasons. He had thrown out a bridge of exquisite grace and boldness to creatures, plants and things. At his death, the great arch was broken and all we can do now is to go and contemplate its ruins in the forest.

V

The Saint

Finally, Francis is a Saint. Saintship is of all qualities the most difficult to define since by its development it raises a man above other men. It has certain points of contact with greatness, but this, however far above us it may be, is more within our grasp. There are always moments when the great man, indifferent though he be to our approval, allows us to perceive his superiority just as Pythagoras sometimes gave spectators a glimpse of his golden thigh in the market place of Crotona. Sometimes indeed it pleases him to exercise his supremacy on us, and we feel with a kind of rapture the impact of genius on our souls. Saintship is a very different matter: it is greatness consummated. The saint lays down the crown which the great man bears on his brow, unconscious that the phantom of this golden circlet lingers round his head in a pale aureole. Greatness rises above

us, sanctity escapes us. And yet the Saint is closer to us than the great man, isolated in his worlds, or even the ordinary man, enfolded in his egotism. The Saint's sympathy draws us to him much more than his superiority repulses us. Incapable of our errors, he understands them better than those who commit similar faults daily. Much less our equal, he is much more our brother. But the perpetual offering that he makes of himself does not prevent him from having his secrets. His is the soul that lavishes itself most and exhausts itself least. He belongs to us by his charity, but escapes us by his prayers. We shall never see the façade of his soul; it is turned from us.

And yet among the saints all are not equally distant from men. Some of them carry on activities which link them to us: they are leaders, founders, doctors, Others, more intimate, are allied to us by the manner in which they struggle, with a courage we lack, against the instincts and sentiments we too feel within us.

But this is not the case with Francis; he retains no vestige of the filth of humanity. He may scourge himself but we cannot see what there was to chastise in him. His sanctity crowns his whole nature so completely that it almost seems to be but innocence. If he were not so near to us by his love, he would be remote indeed by his purity. We understand the surprise of his biographers who, examining this limpid soul on every side, are at once astounded and disconcerted when they fail to discover that atom of shadow discernible in the depths of the purest diamond. An accomplished child, a stainless artist, a poet without fatuity, a prince without pride, he seems not so much to have inflicted privations on himself as to have found the secret of being and having all things, and the joy that irradiates him is merely the evidence of his having life abundantly. It is here that he is unlike all other saints; he lives less in religion and more in love. He was, of course, entirely Catholic; it is futile to attempt to affiliate him to

Protestantism, and there is no justification whatever for attempts to show any kinship between this ardent soul and the most frigid of all human religions; but it is very true that Francis has no tinge of clericalism. He is the Saint of Happiness. The other saints are like travellers on the road, he is like the traveller who has arrived. The others exhaust themselves in efforts to describe celestial happiness, he puts it artlessly before our eyes. The others reach to God only at the summit of their transports, then they fall back with us. Francis, even in his serenity, is always enwrapped in ineffably divine love. He remained in the world of pain by the compassion which associates him with all our sorrows; but he himself was already in that of beatitude, as he lets us know by his perpetual singing If he has reactions at times, if, when certain nuns were assembled to hear him, he sang only the *Miserere*, it was because he realised there that he was upon the earth, as, no doubt, the sight of mournful human faces made him remember.

But presently, faring along the country, he was already in Paradise, and indeed what could Paradise offer more exquisite than the thousand flowers in the grass or the little bird sliding along the slopes of the wind? He enjoyed the gifts God has given to man with such ecstasy that even here below he attained the summits of certain raptures; to behold from afar the towers of the heavenly Jerusalem, crowned with eternal radiance and linked by a glory of rainbows, would not have been more lovely to him than to see at the end of a path, the towers of Perugia rising in the thin azure of October.

. . . .

As I write the closing words of this book the soul of Francis seems to me at once evident and intangible. Often, when I was a child, I used to contemplate the flame of a candle with a grave and naïve attention. Round the long ellipse of light, I noticed a delicate iridescent nimbus, so distinct that I felt sure I could take hold of it. But when I tried to do so, my fingers, disappointed, closed on

emptiness and as I withdrew my hand, almost touched by the flame, the multi-coloured fringe reappeared, so near and yet so mysterious. I have something of the same feeling with respect to Saint Francis: the irritation of repeated efforts to seize the elusive object that fascinates me. But I will avoid this error. The more ardent our curiosity as to certain souls, the more delicate should it become. There are beings whom we may learn to know very intimately by concentrating all the faculties of the intelligence upon them: others we can only know by respecting them. There must be a certain sympathy, not indeed divorced from intelligence, to give access to the festival in which their natures manifest themselves. As one always ends by coming back to the birds in studying Saint Francis, I think here of the methods of the early naturalists; confounded by the innumerable winged species swarming round them, they tried to fix them in the framework of a solid science. They slaughtered hosts of birds, gutted them,

and thought they knew all about them when they had had them stuffed. Many naturalists perpetuate this tradition. But now and again there is one, inspired by a curiosity less brutal and more exacting, who realises that killing is a poor way of arriving at the knowledge he desires; he goes to the woods, lurks patiently in hiding, and charmed, nay, almost intimidated by the grace and beauty he discovers, this unarmed watcher, this delighted student learns all that will be for ever hidden from the sportsman.

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